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APRIL / MAY 2023

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TRUE CRIME:
**A WILD ALABAMA
KIDNAPPING**

P. 136

*Jason Isbell with a 1960 Gibson
Les Paul Custom.*



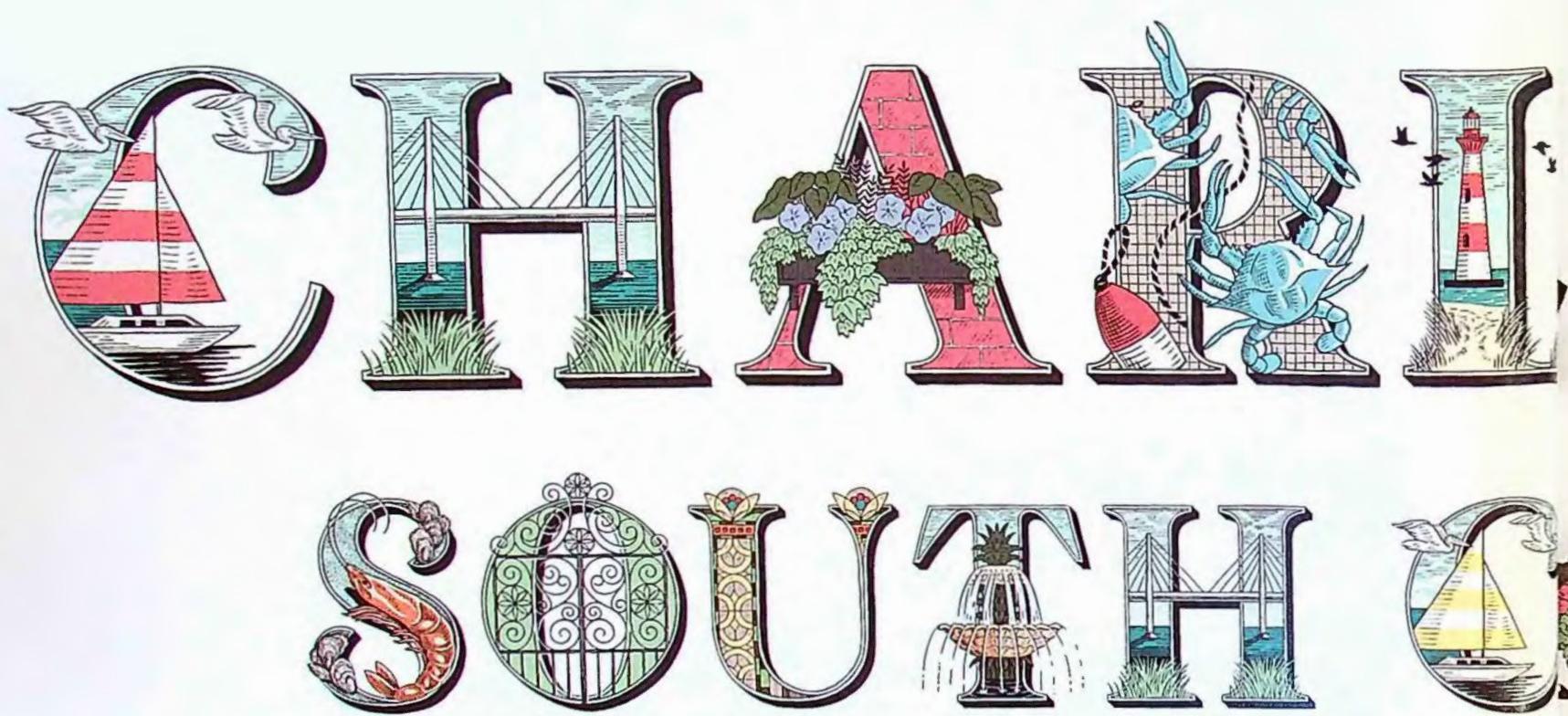
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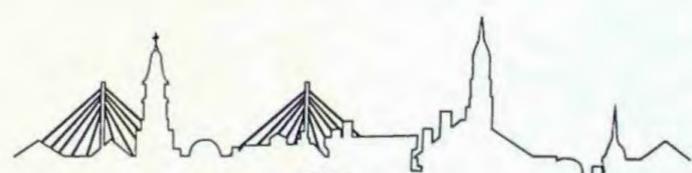
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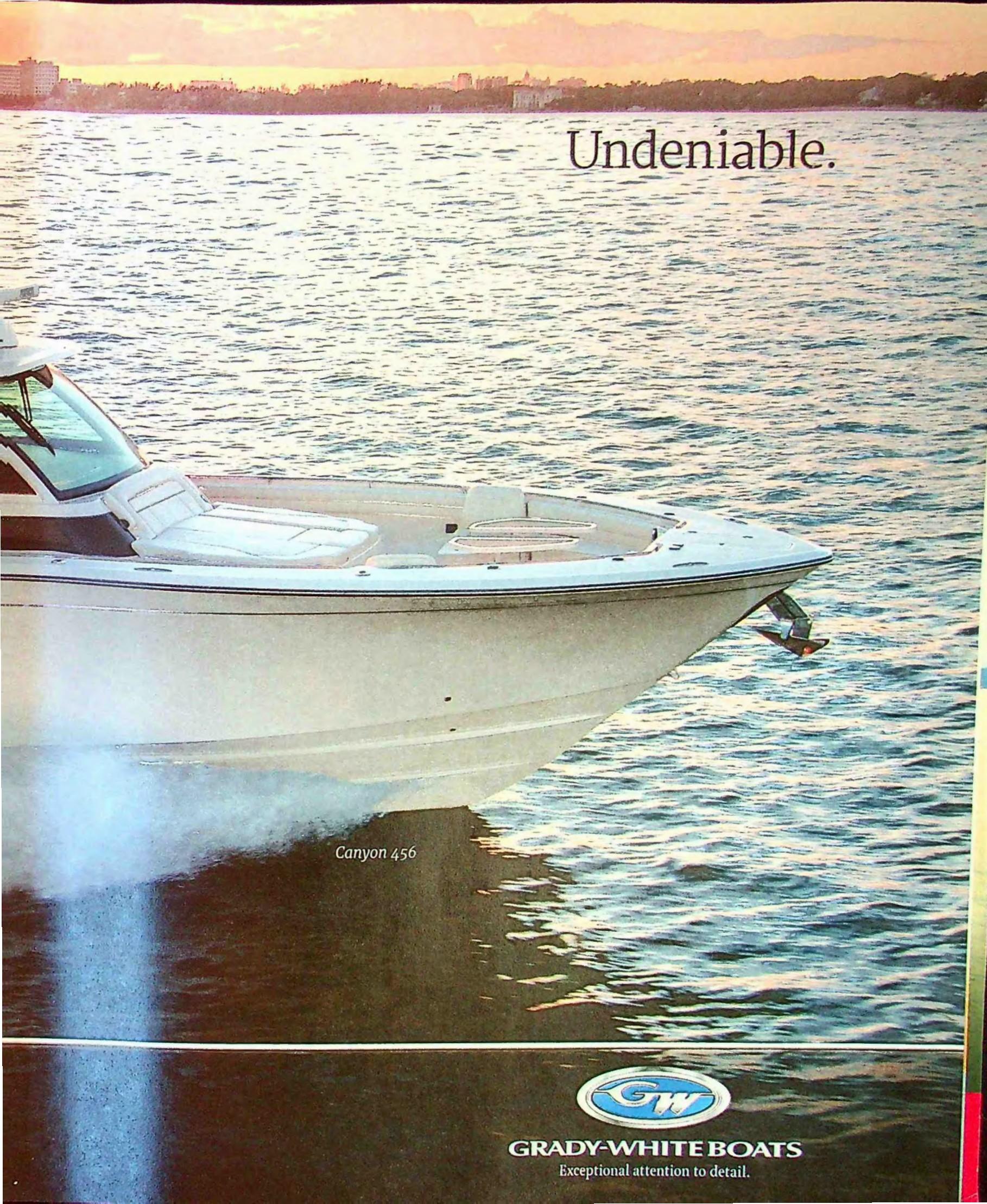




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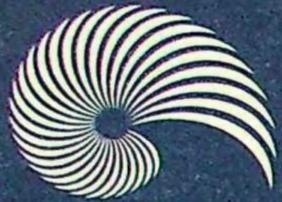
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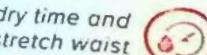
Fly-Fishing Guides Keit & James Sampsel (with daughter Juniper Rogue onboard), hurry back to camp on the Oregon coast.

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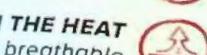
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Vol. XVII / No. 2

FEATURES

APRIL / MAY 2023



109

The South's Hottest Guitar Heroes

Jason Isbell finds a new groove. Plus: Cedric Burnside's propulsive blues, Molly Tuttle's trailblazing bluegrass, and more six-string saviors keeping Southern music rocking

By Matt Hendrickson
and Jim Beaugez

124

Whiskey Blues

Pappy Van Winkle? Rick Bragg on a lifetime of encounters with brown liquor—and how he could never really taste the difference between the good stuff and the swill

128

Gaining Ground

In what could grow to become a national model, a powerhouse sister duo is transforming a former North Carolina plantation into a refuge where Black gardeners can cultivate plots of their own

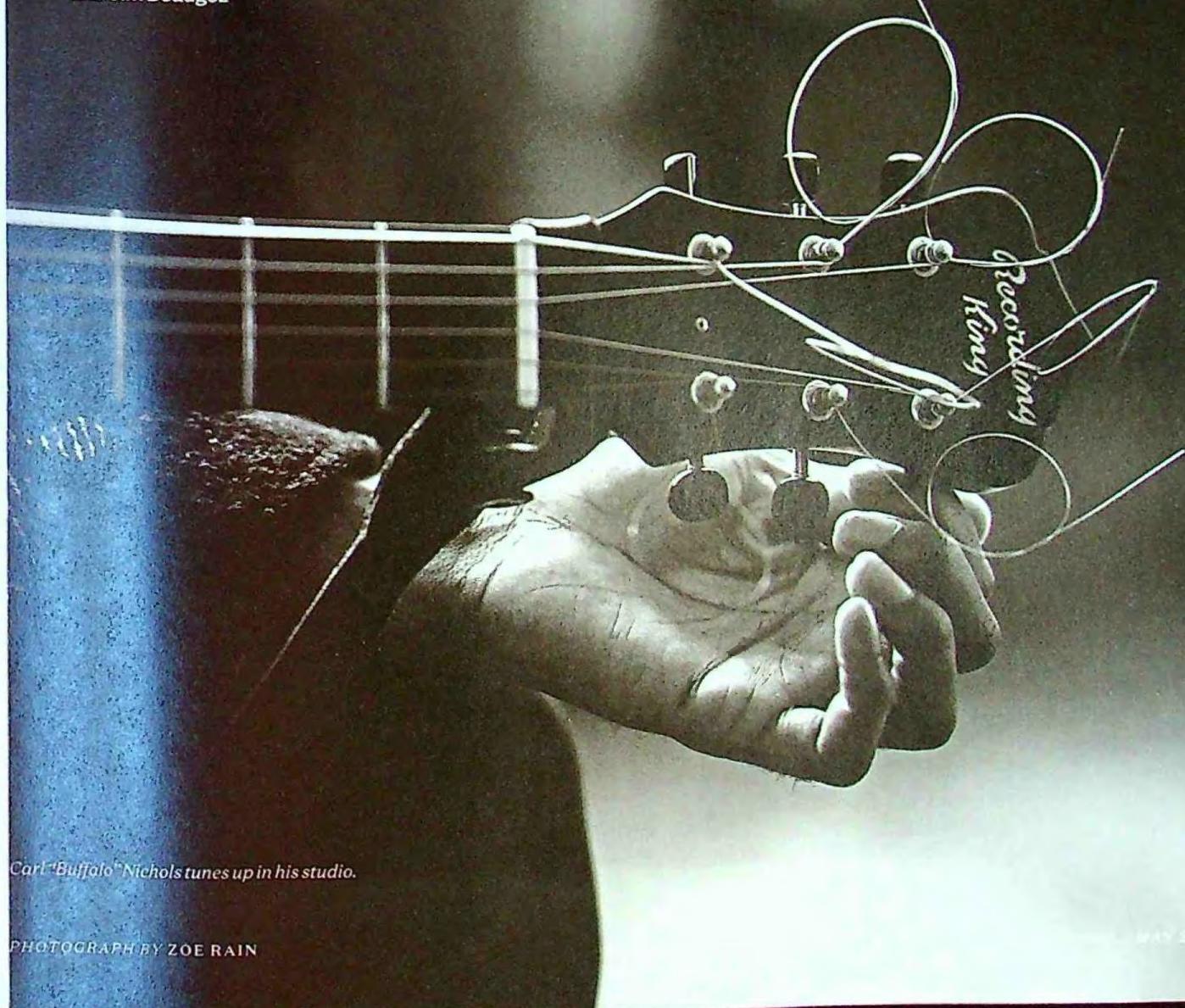
By Cynthia R. Greenlee

136

The Madcap Kidnappers

One morning in 2020, a wealthy Birmingham businessman awoke to a family of uninvited guests in his home. What happened next is a Southern caper you just have to read to believe

By Charles Gaines



Carl "Buffalo" Nichols tunes up in his studio.





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DEPARTMENTS

APRIL / MAY 2023



TALK OF THE SOUTH

31
Interview
Flydriver Logan Sargent sets the pace

36
Arts
Fine-feathered etchings

40
Style
British women's wear with a Southern accent

42
Conservation
Solving a salamander riddle

44
Ask G&G
Shark hype and hush-puppy love

46
Sporting Scene
Going native for deer

48
Books
Uncovering a fallen hero



ON THE COVER
Jason Isbell, photographed at the Mockingbird Theater in Franklin, Tennessee. Photograph by Robby Klein.

JUBILEE

57 **Drinks:** Fresh-squeezed perfection / 60 Anatomy of a Classic: Sizzling soft-shell crabs / 62 Tastemaker: Chef Serigne Mbaye bridges Senegal and NOLA / 64 What's in Season: Spring for pea tendrils / 66 Fork in the Road: John T. Edge toasts a Birmingham bar where patrons are the stars



IN EVERY ISSUE

22 Editor's Letter
24 Contributors
26 Letters



GOOD HUNTING

69
Collections
Reeling in Kentucky history

72
Southern Style
Porch party

76
Homeplace
Dierks Bentley's Nashville bungalow sings

COLUMNS

83
Good Dog
A musician unleashes a rescue pup's bird dog soul
By Dave Simonett

89
This Land
Cracking the crab code
By Latria Graham

105
Country Accent
Putting your moxie where your mouth is
By Vivian Howard

DUE SOUTH

145
Weekends
Louisville's bourbon-spiked renaissance

158
Our Kind of Place
Horse farm healing

163
The Southern Agenda
Goings-on in the South

176
End of the Line
Roy Blount Jr. keeps it simple



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Clockwise from left: A Trex deck; landscape designer Carmen Johnston (photo by John Pyle); stair lighting glows at dusk from a Trex deck.



Live Outside All Summer Long

TREX OUTDOOR LIVING PRODUCTS OFFER THE ULTIMATE SOUTHERN LIFESTYLE SOLUTION

"What does every Southern family love to do? Live outside." That's how Thomaston, Georgia-based landscape designer Carmen Johnston feels. In her work helping families craft beautiful gardens, porches, and decks over the past fifteen years, she says that it has become evident that outdoor shared spaces are essential to those in the Southeast. "It's in our DNA," she says.

That's why the bubbly green thumb has become such a fan of Trex, a composite decking, railing, and outdoor living brand. Trex decking is sustainably made from 95 percent recycled materials, including plastic film and reclaimed wood. The innovative company saves one billion pounds of recycled and reclaimed materials from landfills yearly. But Johnston says Trex offers more than a feel-good composite deck for environmentally responsible homeowners. "It's stylish, extremely durable, and low-maintenance," she says.

Case in point: On a recent photo shoot for a newly completed deck Johnston designed, she says all her team had to do was give the client's Trex deck a quick wipe with a bit of soap and water, and it was close-up ready. "It's so easy to clean and take care of," Johnston says.

And a far cry from the deck she enjoyed growing up. "I grew up outside Atlanta, and we had one of those wooden decks. As a kid, what do I remember about that wooden deck? Always getting splinters!" she says. "That's one of the great things about Trex decks; they're extremely user-friendly."

Unlike traditional wood decks that require sanding and staining to maintain their quality and lengthen their longevity, Trex materials offer a much longer life span. So much longer that the company offers warranties of up to fifty years on Trex decking.

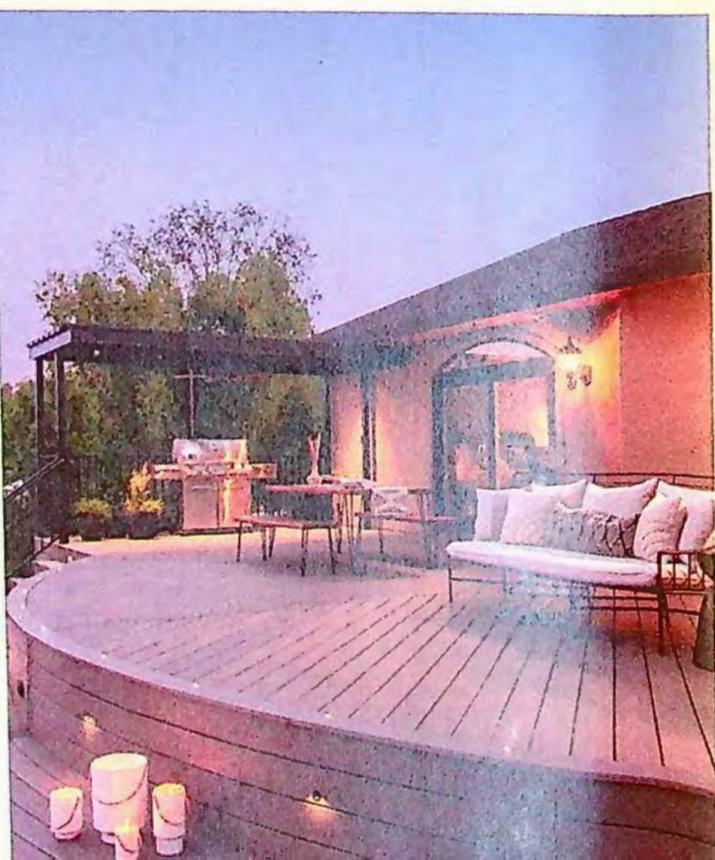
Given the blazing sun and temperatures in the South, how composite decking handles the heat is new a frontier for the category. "I'm in the South, and it gets hot, hot, hot here," Johnston says. "But that's also the time you want to be outside on the deck, enjoying the verdant landscape of the season and making memories with your family. The Trex Transcend Lineage composite decking is amazing because it keeps cool." Now, you'll still need your flip-flops on those 90-degree days, but Johnston speaks from experience when she says Lineage manages to stay cooler with its heat-mitigating technology than deck boards of a similar color.

But the real sell to the landscape designer is how Trex integrates with any property. "The easy-to-love color palette works so well whether you have a brick house, a wood house, stucco, or stone," Johnston says. "Trex is easy to install for contractors and homeowners with handy DIY skills. It installs very much like wood." On that end, Johnston says Trex has thought of pretty much everything.

"I used the Trex Signature aluminum and glass railing in a big backyard project last spring. I loved that the glass railing allowed for clear views of the pool and other elements we installed," Johnston says. "It's a durable choice, but the customized options make it sophisticated. And, true to the low-maintenance mantra of the Trex brand, you'll never have to worry about fading or corrosion with the aluminum railing." Or you can even choose cocktail railing, which is perfect for outdoor entertaining—the style easily holds drinks and small plates, making extra room for guests to mingle.

For nearly thirty years, Trex has been upending the way people think about outdoor living by combining recycled materials to create beautiful and durable products, including railing, deck lighting, pergolas, furniture, and more. The result is a more sustainable and family friendly way to extend life to the outdoors. "With Trex decking," Johnston says, "there's no need to stain or spend hours cleaning it. You can tidy up and be ready for deck cocktails with friends within minutes."

To learn more about Trex Transcend Lineage, visit lineage.trex.com





A photograph showing two white lounge chairs with integrated footrests and white canopies. One chair has a striped beach towel draped over its backrest. They are placed on a dark brown Trex composite deck. In the background, there's a body of water with ripples. The overall scene suggests a relaxing outdoor environment.

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*Although Trex Transcend Lineage is designed to be cooler than most other composite decking products of a similar color on a hot sunny day, it will get hot. On hot days, care should be taken to avoid extended contact between exposed skin and the deck surface, especially with young children and those with special needs.

EDITOR'S LETTER

Follow me on Instagram and Twitter @davedibenedetto



I've known G&G's music columnist, Matt Hendrickson, since 1995. Back then he was part of the team launching something called a website for *Rolling Stone*, a concept then well ahead of its time. Not long after that, he became a staff writer for the iconic music magazine, where he covered everyone from David Bowie to Phish. And while his credentials were impressive, the perks of his friendship were even better, e.g., tickets to just about any show you wanted to catch. But most important, he always kept us plugged in to what we *should* be listening to.

Not surprisingly, when I landed at G&G in 2008, Hendrickson was one of my first calls. Ever since, he's been bringing his ear and insights to our music cover-

Southern Sounds

OUR MUSIC ISSUE AND MORE GREAT TUNES ON THE "BACK PORCH"



age, from a cover story on the Avett Brothers back in 2011 to one of Gregg Allman's final interviews, which remains an all-time favorite among readers. (He also just compiled G&G's first-ever record, which was printed at Citizen Vinyl in Asheville and is available now at ggfieldshop.com.)

For this issue, Hendrickson visited with Jason Isbell on his property outside of Nashville. Not only is Isbell one of the South's most evocative singer-songwriters, he also happens to be a phenomenal guitarist, a "true triple threat," as his former Drive-By Truckers bandmate Patterson Hood says. On the horizon for Isbell this year: a new album, a role in a Martin Scorsese film, and an HBO documentary. Beyond Isbell, in this issue you'll also be privy to a conversation with the Mississippi Hill Country bluesman Cedric Burnside, and get the lowdown on the next wave of Southern guitar greats, including Molly Tuttle and Christone "Kingfish" Ingram.

If you're a fan of live music (and I have a feeling you are), check out our Back Porch Sessions, an intimate series of performance videos we post on social media and at gardenandgun.com. The porch in reference was attached to G&G's original Charleston, South Carolina, office, and it was just big enough to hold a small band and as many staffers as could squeeze in. (And, on one occasion, Bill Murray, who dropped in to hear Steep Canyon Rangers.) These days, the sessions are filmed in our new digs up the road, with recent performances from Ranky Tanky, St. Paul & the Broken Bones, Sierra Hull, and more.

Seeing these artists up close, I'm blown away every time they start strumming a guitar or belting out lyrics, not only by the individual talent on display but also by the Southern music traditions that run through them. Happy listening.

DAVID DIBENEDETTO
Senior Vice President & Editor in Chief

Charleston Eats

A tasty addition to the Holy City's dining scene

At a G&G editorial meeting not long ago, the talk turned to Southern restaurants (not an uncommon topic). This time, many of us were singing the praises of Vern's, which opened last summer in our hometown of Charleston. I'd eaten there recently with friends, and we shared a variety of plates, from the bone marrow special to bucatini with Swiss chard and black truffle to sunchokes with winter greens. In a town known as a culinary destination, Vern's should be on your short list.



Clockwise from left:
Back Porch Sessions
with St. Paul &
the Broken Bones
(bottom) and Ranky
Tanky; the Avett
Brothers on a 2011
cover; roast spring
chicken at Vern's.



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Joe Ciardiello

ILLUSTRATOR

When Joe Ciardiello looks at someone, he's seeing more than his or her features. "People's experiences can show on their faces," says the New Jersey-based illustrator, who has spent his career creating portraits from those observations for the likes of the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and *Rolling Stone*. "Especially musicians: When they're performing, they have so many expressions." Ciardiello—who has himself played the drums in blues, roots, rock, and jazz bands since he was a teenager—illustrated a few of his own role models for "The South's Hottest Guitar Heroes" (p. 109). Among his favorite guitarists: Susan Tedeschi and Derek Trucks. "I loved getting to draw them."

"People's experiences can show on their faces. Especially musicians"

—Joe Ciardiello, who illustrated music legends for "The South's Hottest Guitar Heroes" (p. 109)



Kennedi Carter
PHOTOGRAPHER

Kennedi Carter was only twenty-one when *British Vogue* tapped her to photograph Beyoncé, making her the youngest person ever to shoot a cover for the publication. Since then, her work has appeared in *Glamour* and *Vanity Fair*, and she's currently at work on a project about Black motherhood. For "Gaining Ground" (p. 128), the Durham, North Carolina, native turned her lens on Catawba Trail Farm's Delphine Sellars and Lucille Patterson, two women Carter grew up going to church with. "It was an honor for me to photograph my elders," she says, "and glimpse what they have been doing with the land they are caring for."



Dave Simonett
WRITER

Penning this issue's Good Dog (p. 83) was a little different from the creative process Dave Simonett, the lead singer of the folk group Trampled by Turtles, most often experiences. "When I write songs, I'm more open-ended and abstract," he says. "This is directed at a specific story. But the big difference from songwriting? It doesn't rhyme." The band is currently touring with a new album, *Alpenglow*, but as soon as Simonett can take a break, he's planning a quail hunt with the subject of his essay, his mutt, Hrbek. "In the bird-hunting circles I run in, it's not really common to see a rescue or mixed-breed dog in the field. People don't believe it."



Ashleigh Bell Pedersen
WRITER

"I've never been a horse person," says Ashleigh Bell Pedersen, who wrote about a South Carolina farm that gives horses and humans a chance to connect (p. 158). "But I feel such an affinity for them now that when I pass by this stable close to where I live in Brooklyn, I pause to say a quiet little hello." Pedersen, who grew up in Virginia, wrote *The Crocodile Bride*, a bayou-set novel that came out last year and taught her a little something about determination. "Between the time I started and the time it got published, it had been a full decade. But it needed to be that long to sort through what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it."



Cynthia R. Greenlee
WRITER

After more than two decades of calling Durham, North Carolina, home, Cynthia Greenlee feels like there's still plenty to explore. "This city is drenched in so many of the things that make the South interesting; I find something new all the time—like Catawba Trail Farm," she says of the spot she profiled in "Gaining Ground" (p. 128). A James Beard Award-winning writer who grew up not far away in Greensboro, Greenlee has chronicled food, history, and pop culture for the *New York Times* and *Smithsonian*. "I call myself country cosmopolitan. I write best when I'm in the South, and I never had any desire to live anywhere else."

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LETTERS

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"To see manjar in my favorite publication was truly special"

TEXAS TALK

I had no idea Charley Crockett ever called Dallas home, but he will always be welcome here and we are proud of him (Music, October/November 2022). As for the observation that Dallas has done a poor job of promoting Deep Ellum as one of America's most important music scenes, I agree and am committed to changing that. Of course, I would welcome Mr. Crockett's help.

Eric Johnson, mayor
Dallas, Texas

Bao Ong wrote eloquently and frankly about Houston ("Houston's Wide Welcome," February/March 2023). The weather and traffic are as described. He says he moved there for the food. I believe him.

Gates Whiteley
San Antonio, Texas

S. C. Gwynne's finding Texans to be friendly ("The Heart of Texas," February/March 2023) mirrored my lifelong observation about North Carolinians. I have also witnessed the influx of out-of-staters who generally become friendlier before long.

Jonathan Maxwell
Greensboro, North Carolina

FEEDING THE SOUL

My wife couldn't wait to try the recipe for arroz con pollo (Anatomy of a Classic, February/March 2023). I added some Hatch green chiles to kick it up a notch.

Allen Russell
Santa Fe, New Mexico

In the February/March 2023 issue, Lindsey Liles's piece about conservation efforts in Puerto Rico felt like a pivotal extension of the word *South*. Then, I was so moved when I saw Chilean food historian Carla Burgos (Anatomy of a Classic). My husband is Chilean, and we make a conscious effort to share his traditions. To see *manjar* in my favorite publication was truly special.

Cass Herrington
Asheville, North Carolina

My wild and crazy friend, a floral designer, shared that *Garden & Gun*'s name captures the dichotomy of his nature. Tracking down an edition was like finding a golden ticket in a Willy Wonka candy bar, and now, I want a duck call.

Lell Wood
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Social Chatter

GARDENANDGUN.COM
AND BEYOND

WE ASKED...

Who is the greatest Southern musician or group of all time?

On Facebook and Twitter, readers weighed in on the legends that shaped the region's sound.

The original Allman Brothers lineup. Tight as a damned tourniquet. **Jeff F.**

Little Richard!
Colette H.

Lynyrd Skynyrd. Not "Free Bird," "Sweet Home Alabama" Skynyrd, but the Southern jam band Skynyrd. **David H.**

Saint Dolly Parton.
Steve E.

Robert Johnson, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Hank Williams, Elvis Presley. **Phillip C.**

Some fella named Johnny that beat the devil in a fiddling contest. **George P.**

John Lee Hooker, Nina Simone, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. **Becca R.**

Ma Rainey set the standard for all those mentioned above. **Richard H.**

There is no best, but there are quite a few greats. **Steve S.**



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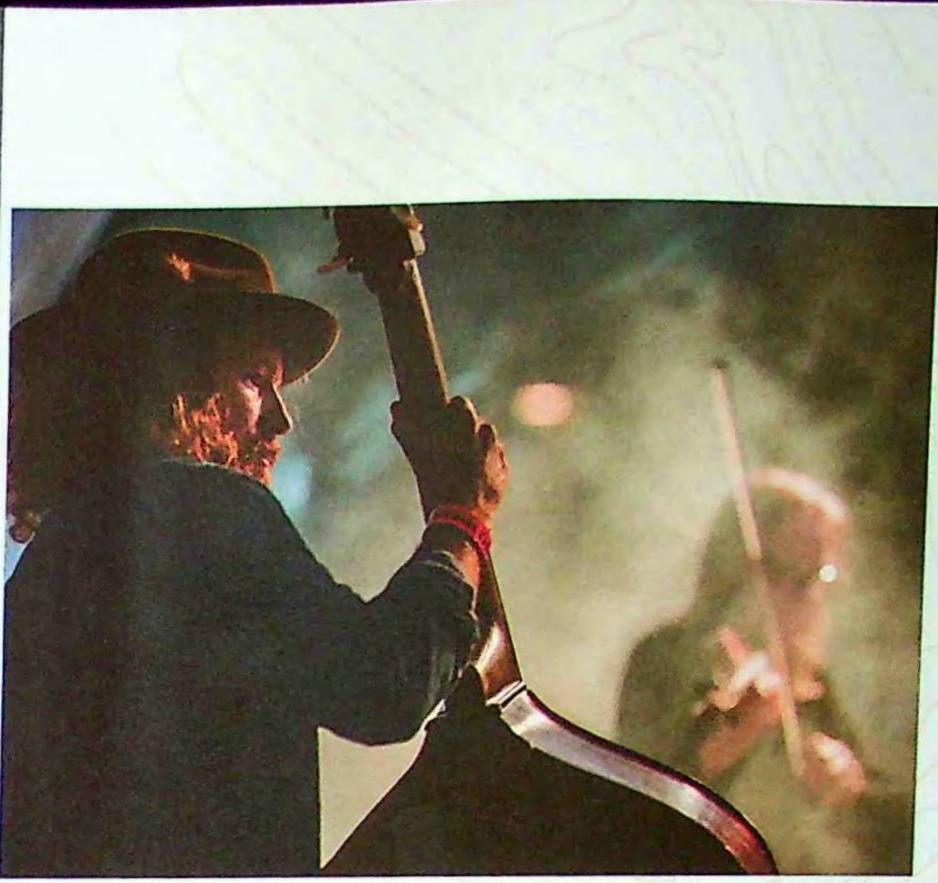


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In this era dominated by streaming playlists and compressed sound files, the richness and warmth of vinyl recordings cannot be matched. And whether you're a vinyl newbie or an avid collector, we hope you enjoy G&G's first limited-edition compilation pressed at Citizen Vinyl in Asheville. At G&G, our motto is FOLLOW OUR LEAD, and included on this album are some of the brightest up-and-coming Southern musicians, whom we're eager to share with you.

To curate the playlist, we naturally turned to our in-house expert, Matt Hendrickson. Hendrickson has covered music for G&G since the beginning, fifteen years and counting. In that time, he's interviewed a veritable who's who of Southern music legends: Miranda Lambert, Drive-By Truckers, Steve Earle, Loretta Lynn. For this enterprise, Hendrickson was tasked with delivering the freshest new sounds or the next Grammy/gold record artists he could find, a challenge he gladly accepted.

"The idea was to find the best of what's to come," Hendrickson says. "Some of the artists included people I've written about, some I haven't." But all of them

have one thing in common: exceptional storytelling. "Lyrically, our readers are interested in songs with some depth and heft, whether that's alt-country or hard-core rock. All of these artists are tremendous musicians who can really tell a story," Hendrickson says. You'll hear a record that starts on both sides, A and B, with rock and roll. "Then I downshifted into quieter songs," Hendrickson says. "I believe the first track has to grab you so you want to keep on listening." While listening, you'll most likely start to daydream about your next concert or show. You'd be hard pressed to find a more exciting music city (or welcoming creative community) in the Southern mountains than the one in Asheville. We couldn't have found a better partner to make this inaugural G&G album than with Asheville, with its host of vibrant venues and the vinyl pressing shop at Citizen Vinyl. We hope you enjoy this album, designed to be played again and again. Ready to give it a listen?

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Tune In

From pop ballads to gospel songs, the album is an eclectic mix of the best of what's new

"April Blossoms"
THE PRESCRIPTIONS

"Sweet Little Girl"
KELSEY WALDON

"Ships in the Harbor"
TOMMY PRINE

"Generational Dust"
JOHN MORELAND

"Three Leaf Clover"
JULIA SANDERS

"Josephine"
JACK SCHNEIDER

"Summertime Sunset"
LARKIN POE

"Me and My Sunshine"
MOTEL RADIO

"Angel Slide"
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"Friendship"
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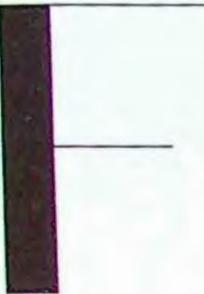
Winning Formula

FLORIDIAN LOGAN SARGEANT
HITS THE GRID AS FORMULA
ONE'S SOLE AMERICAN DRIVER

By Steve Russell



TALK OF THE SOUTH



ormula One racing has long been hugely popular in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East. In the past few years, though, the U.S. fan base has swelled by millions, largely lured to the glitzy, globe-trotting sport by Netflix's hit behind-the-scenes series *Formula 1: Drive to Survive*. The only thing that's been missing for these new American converts is an American driver to cheer. Until the current season, that is, when Williams Racing chose Logan Sargeant to occupy one of F1's twenty seats, thereby granting him admission into one of the most exclusive groups of professional athletes on the planet. Raised in Florida, the twenty-two-year-old has been racing since he was six, and relocated to Europe before his teens to advance his ambitions. But even while careening around tracks from Australia to Qatar, he remains a barbecue-craving, die-hard Dolphins-cheering Southerner at heart. Luckily, his rookie season will see F1 stage three stateside grands prix, first in his "backyard" of Miami, May 5 through 7, then in Austin and Las Vegas. No doubt, Sargeant's life is accelerating even faster than usual. Then again, he's used to the pace.

How did you first catch the racing bug growing up in Boca Raton?

I played a little baseball and such, then one day I drove a go-kart and really took to it. At that point, it was mostly about being a kid and just having some fun. But by a couple of years later, I was competing at a relatively high level in local karting races, and went on to win the Florida Winter Tour. Really, that's where my career began. By twelve, I was serious enough about becoming a professional driver that I relocated to Switzerland, then to London. I wanted the toughest competition, and you had to go to Europe to race the best. Even then, actually making it to F1 seemed like a stretch, but that was the dream.

Why not channel that need for speed into NASCAR?

Oh, growing up where I did, I was more into NASCAR at first, and a big Jeff Gordon fan. But I remember, at eight years old, coming into the living room, where my dad happened to be watching an F1 race, back when [British driver] Lewis Hamilton was driving for the McLaren team. That's the moment F1 came into my life.

And now you're racing against Lewis Hamilton, seven-time F1 champion.

That's the scary part. I'm lining up with guys from the first race I ever watched. But once you get strapped into the car and put

your helmet on, you don't care—it's every man for himself.

What's the biggest adjustment to driving an F1 car?

To be honest, it's very different. F1 races are longer than [feeder series] F2 races, and so require more tire changes and pit stops, but in general that kind of strategy is handled behind the scenes, where others on the team can better monitor the overall picture. I control what I can control. These cars have so much more power and brake performance and cornering speed than anything I've driven before. The challenge is understanding how to utilize that and maximize the car at every opportunity. In F2, a driver can sort of hustle the car around the track, but in F1, you have to be perfect. And because of that, mistakes are much more punishing.

What about all the glamour that comes with an F1 seat?

It's a much bigger spotlight, for sure. The media attention has gone up a lot, and I'm still getting used to juggling those demands. I have to balance all that with getting ready to race. As long as I perform at the high level I know I can, it's going to be a good year.

F1 is a truly international sport. How do you feel about being the

sole American driver?

Privileged and excited to represent my country the best I can. I want to attract the American fan base, and if they've already been cheering for another F1 driver, maybe they can now support two drivers. Hopefully, I'll give everyone back home something to cheer.

Will you still have the big American flag on your helmet as you did in F2?

It will be somewhat altered on my new helmet, but yes, you'll still see it on there.

What races are you most looking forward to?

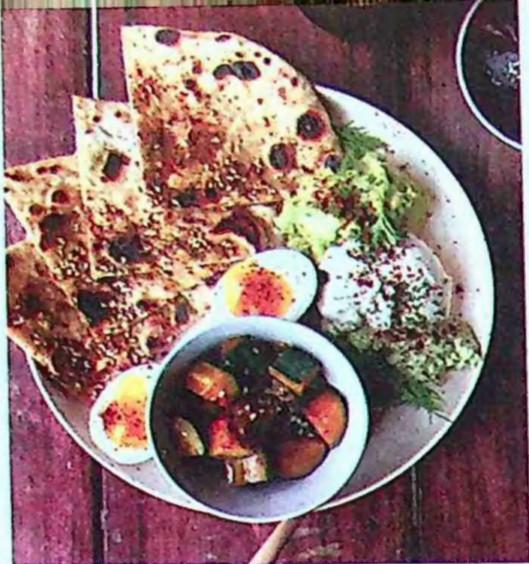
As a kid, racing in the Singapore Grand Prix and the Japanese Grand Prix were dreams of mine, so that's going to be amazing to get on those tracks for the first time. Of course, the three races this year in the United States will be special, especially Miami. I was there behind the scenes at the inaugural Miami Grand Prix last year, which was very cool, and this year I'll be competing in it. I'm a Dolphins fan through and through, Heat and Marlins too, so that's basically my backyard. I'm really looking forward to having my family and friends there at the race and feeling that energy.

How do you reconnect to your Southern roots when you get back home?

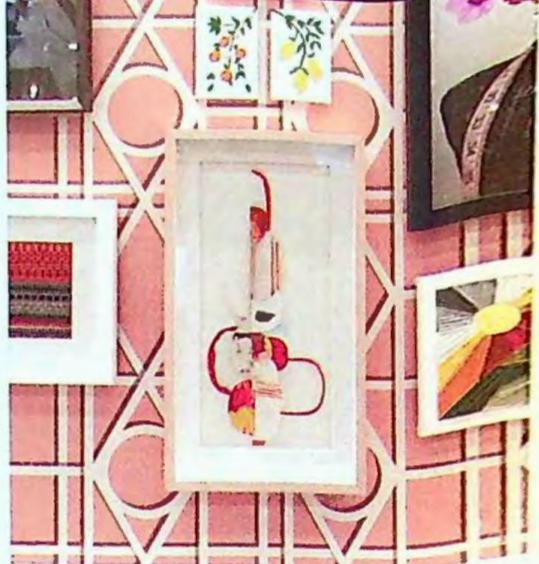
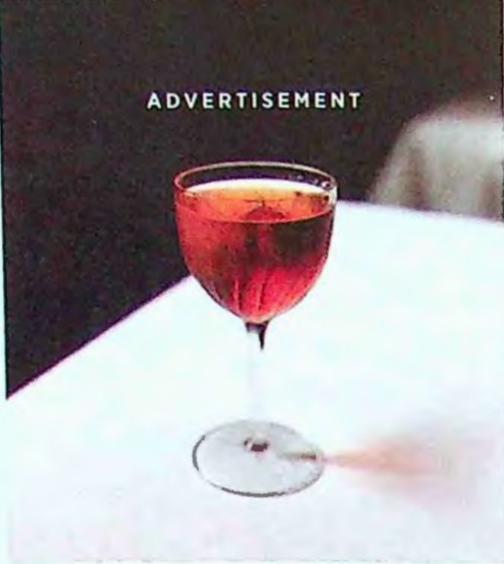
The biggest thing I miss is the weather and beaches and being able to get out in a boat whenever I want, so when I'm back home in Florida, I spend a lot of time out on the ocean, just cruising or fishing. And, obviously, I have to eat some barbecue and wings. It's also hard to find a good piece of prime rib in Europe. And sometimes I just need a proper American burger, the kind that when you're eating it, you realize that you probably shouldn't be eating it but that doesn't stop you. For sure, I consume more calories when I'm home. ☺

Opposite: Logan Sargeant, in his 2023 Williams Racing suit, with his American flag helmet.
Previous page: The Formula One rookie, ready for his close-up.





ADVERTISEMENT



A Capital Idea

A KENTUCKY GENT MAKES THE CASE FOR TAKING
A COLUMBIA, SOUTH CAROLINA, VACATION

Below a stunning photo of jalapeño creamed corn, lobster deviled eggs, shrimp and blue corn grits, and a reposado tequila cocktail, Josh Johnson wrote on Instagram: "Let this serve as a reminder to stop sleeping on smaller towns because their culinary and hospitality spaces shine just as bright as the bigger cities." The Kentucky-based blogger would know. Johnson, better known as @thekentuckygent, partnered with *Garden & Gun* for a visit to Columbia, South Carolina. He's made it his work to experience the Southeast and beyond and report back to his many followers the best travel tips, food suggestions, and cocktail haunts. And he's here to preach the good news: There's never been a better time to see Columbia steal South Carolina's spotlight.

Located in the heart of the state, the capital city of Columbia is in a geographical region known as the Midlands. Two hours from Charleston, South Carolina, and just over a three-hour-drive from Atlanta, it's a relatively accessible destination to reach, and compact enough to make it easy to navigate. From his vantage point at the Cambria Hotel, Johnson was in close proximity to all the arts and entertainment of the Vista district, a centrally located neighborhood minutes from the statehouse and University of South Carolina's campus. "The Cambria Hotel was perfectly located to allow for walking to many downtown establishments," Johnson says. "The comfy accommodations made for the perfect home base for a weekend full of some of the best food I've had in a long while."

For a homey immersion into Columbia's thriving culinary scene, the Lexingtonian opted to visit Bourbon, a whiskey bar and Cajun-Creole restaurant, in the historic Brennen Building. The postbellum masonry structure has been operating as various restaurants, saloons, and at one time a billiard hall for more than 150 years. "It made this Kentucky boy feel right at home," Johnson says of the laid-back watering hole. "Can't-miss items included their pimento cheese and boudin balls. Go for the Heart of Darkness if you're a fan of flavor-forward cocktails." Feeling quite at home, Johnson opted to continue his bar crawl at The War Mouth, a wildly popular Cottontown neighborhood respite for cocktails, draughts, and barbecue. Johnson came away just as smitten with the spot as native Columbians. "There was quite the wait on a Friday night, but it was well worth it! Smoked meats are always a win in my book," he says.

But Columbia isn't only a culinary capital. Visitors will find a host of attractions to break up their meals. The Riverbanks Zoo and Garden, for instance, is a short drive from the city center and home to two thousand exotic animals including penguins, koalas, and even a Galápagos tortoise. "Pro tip: Go early in the day, and you'll be one of the first few people there, and most of the animals will be out and about," Johnson says.

Nearby, Claude Monet's *The Seine at Giverny* and glassblower Dale Chihuly's *Chandelier* can be viewed at the Columbia Museum of Art. The state's premier international arts museum showcases European, American, Asian, and modern and contemporary fine and decorative art on Main Street. Others may want to get a better understanding of the state's unique history. The South Carolina State Museum, a four-story space on the banks of the Congaree River, covers it all, from prehistoric history—don't skip the giant megalodon shark replica—to the Revolutionary War and beyond.

But if you're like Johnson, what's for dinner will be your most pressing question. And for that, the savvy traveler has your answer: Smoked. The restaurant operated by siblings Greg Middleton and Sara Middleton Styles serves lunch, brunch, and dinner indoors and on a spacious patio and was the highlight of Johnson's trip. "I was completely blown away by the menu offerings, service, and design choices of the space," Johnson says.

And as Smoked houses an on-site microbrewery for local brand Peak Drift, it's also an ideal place to begin a brewery hop, as Johnson did. Columbia offers a healthy lineup of great brew houses. "Hunter-Gatherer Brewery at The Hangar impressed me with their locale inside an old airplane hangar, but Savage Craft Ale Works took it home for me," Johnson says.

With hospitality at its heart and a growing food and drink scene ready to challenge its neighbors, Columbia, Johnson says, makes for a capital idea for a visit. "I left with a smile on my face and a full belly."

Plan your culinary escape to South Carolina's capital at ExperienceColumbiaSC.com

From left: The Shakshouka-ish from *smallSUGAR*; a Smoked Old Fashioned from Smoked; an artful display at Cambria Hotel.

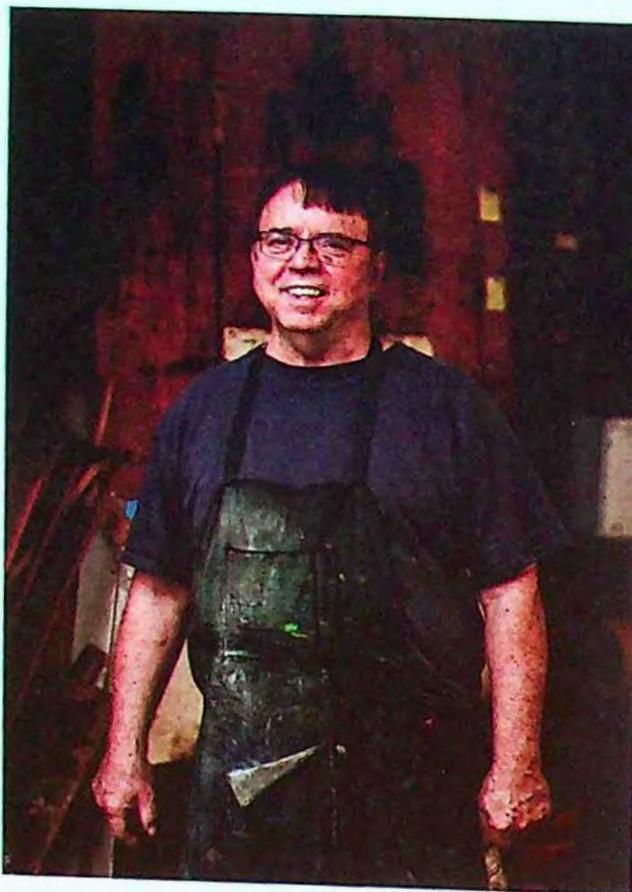
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ARTS

Soaring Detail

FLORIDA BIRDS FLY TO LIFE IN JOHN COSTIN'S ETCHINGS

By Susan B. Barnes

Surrounded by ink-soaked sponges spilling from a tower of tin pails, scraps of paper smudged with color tests, and scribbled notes tacked to the walls, John Costin runs his thumb over a thin sheet of copper. Measuring thirty-one and a half by forty-six inches, the sheet serves as the key plate for *Verdant Landscape*, an etching of sandhill cranes he's worked on for more than six months here in his Tampa studio, formerly an early-1900s dry goods store.

"This is a plate that I generally do first, and it has all the detail on it," Costin explains. "I've etched these plates I don't know how many times, and I still haven't finished. I dream about this bird."

Costin, who is sixty-six, became "fascinated with birds" as a teenager when he moved with his family

from Detroit to Lake Wales, Florida, in 1969. Today he's an avid birder and carries his camera to snap photos of different species that he then catalogues to inspire future etchings. The pages of an oversize book he compiled of his pieces titled *Large Florida Birds* reveal his passion—in the striking details of his majestic anhinga, stoic brown pelican, and vivid roseate spoonbill.

"Even when I was a child, I was interested in art and making drawings and paintings," Costin says. "But I never thought I would be an artist as a profession." Instead, Costin joined his father in electrical work and carved out a successful career. Art held its allure, however, and he enrolled in classes at the University of South Florida in 1979. There, he learned about printmaking, a medium that traces its roots to about the second century in China, and the basics of etchings, first produced in Germany around 1500.

"It was such a good fit for me because of the way my mind works," he says. "On my own, I just started working on it and designed my own press"—an apparatus that now stands in the middle of his studio—"and wow...I took off with it like a sort of mad scientist in his laboratory, trying this and trying that and problem-solving."

Turning back to the sandhill cranes, Costin explains his process: After choosing a subject, he sketches the bird—first in pencil, then in watercolor—and from that creates a small, detailed drawing. Once satisfied with the depiction, he turns it into a life-size version, and then redraws the detailed rendering onto a copper key plate using a pencil. Next, he etches the rendering into the surface using ferric chloride acid.

"I like the idea that when viewers see these images, they get a sense of what this bird is like in the real world, because of its scale," he says. "You can see the detail on the legs, for instance, the scaling patterns"—legs that

Clockwise from left:
Costin in his Tampa
studio; his etching
Crested Caracara;
a detail of the copper
key plate for the
sandhill cranes of
Verdant Landscape;
the printed image
of the cranes coming
off the press Costin
designed.

Adventures Guides Seth Berger & Geoff Grant
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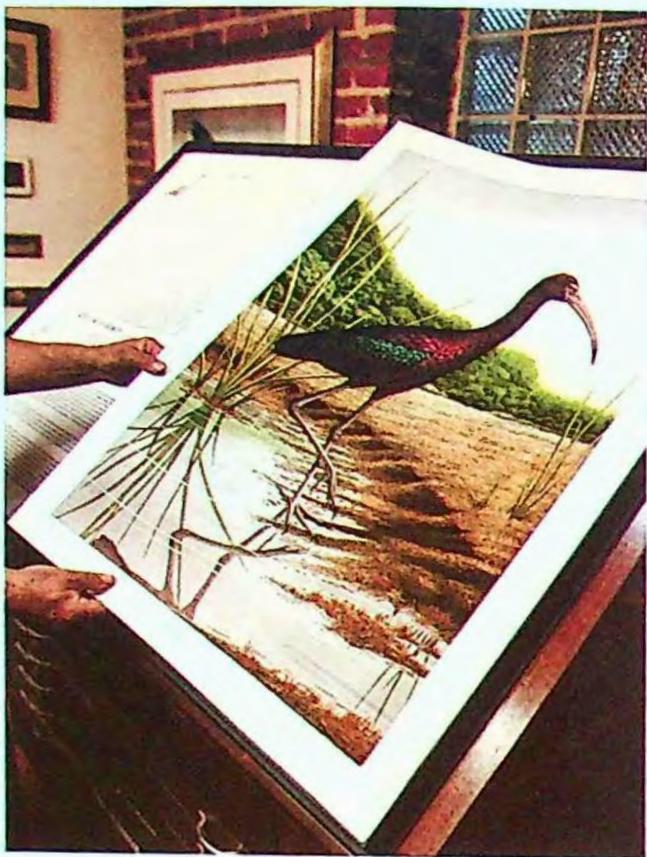
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TALK OF THE SOUTH



alone accounted for forty hours of work.

Once Costin finishes the detailing on the key plate, he transfers the image to another clean plate and begins applying color by etching areas such as the sky or trees with their respective hues. He applies these pigments *à la poupee*, which means adding more than one color to the same plate for printing. Because copper oxidizes and muddies colors, he achieves his vibrant hues by facing his plates with a sheet of paper-thin steel.

Problem-solving like that also comes into play during the color printing process: When paper goes through the press, it stretches. Costin takes that stretching into account by working with multiple plates of different sizes to ensure everything aligns on its way to a final image. Florida's humidity can also impact the prints' registrations.

"Not many artists did colored etchings; it's extremely rare," Costin says of his predecessors. "In most cases, they're printed in black and white, then they're hand painted because registration is so difficult." He elaborates, leafing through a pile of proofs to show examples from his own trial and error: "Have you ever seen a newspaper where it looks like you need 3D glasses? That's where the registration is off. There's a layer of engineering that goes into these as much as the artwork, so I'm working with both sides of the brain."

In that stage, "I'm actually creating a physical texture, which is more like sculpture than a drawing or

painting," he adds. "What that texture does is it holds ink to the surface, and then when it transfers to paper, that's where I get my image."

Once Costin is happy with his final proof, he determines the number of prints to make in the series and begins his final step: hand painting the finer details with watercolors, which presents its own challenges. "The ink is oil based, and the paints are water based," he says, so he has to manipulate the paints so the two work together. "If I don't, they sit on top of each other, and visually, it doesn't look right."

That attention to detail has won Costin admirers across the world, and closer to home, too. Brad Massey, the curator of public history at the Tampa Bay History Center, built a new exhibition there inspired by Costin's work. *Etched Feathers: A History of the Printed Bird* runs through October 15. "After talking to John, we decided that his process and his ultimate product are just so interesting and mesmerizing that we should really do a show about them," Massey says.

In addition to Costin's etchings, the exhibition follows the evolution of the printing process through the centuries and showcases bird prints dating back hundreds of years, pulled from Costin's personal collection, along with two rare books by the English naturalist Mark Catesby on loan from the University of South Florida. Costin has acquired his set of antique prints over the past thirty years, enthralled by "the history, the time period, the subject matter, how different artists of different eras approached making imagery," he says. Earlier ones were more primitive, but "as history goes on and people learn more about the process, you can see how the images become more refined, and how they use space and perspective," he continues, noting that John James Audubon's and Catesby's renderings became scientific documentation of bird species.

As for his own evolution, "I experiment all the time," he says. "This process is made for experimentation. You're only limited by your imagination." ☐

"There's a layer of engineering that goes into these as much as the artwork, so I'm working with both sides of the brain"

From top: A life-size etching of a glossy ibis from Costin's book Large Florida Birds; a comparison of the uncolored sandhill cranes etching and the image after Costin has hand painted it with transparent watercolors.





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STYLE

London Bridge

AT WIGGY KIT, SOUTHERN SPIRIT AND STYLE CROSS THE POND

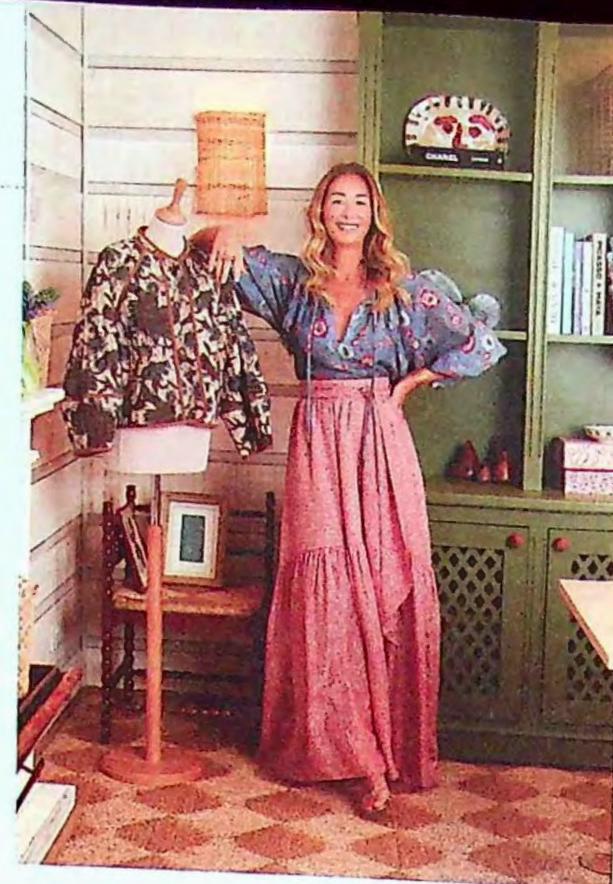
By Caroline Sanders Clements

One afternoon in the late nineties, about a year after Laura Vinroot Poole had opened Capitol, her trailblazing boutique in Charlotte, "the sunniest, most charming, and most radiant girl walked in and asked if I was hiring," Vinroot Poole recalls. She was *not*, in fact. The shop was just getting off the ground and Vinroot Poole—owner, founder, and sole employee—could barely pay herself. But something about the woman, with her savvy fashion sense and effervescent British lilt, made her say yes.

In turn, that staffer, Wiggy Hindmarch—a British national born in Singapore who had recently graduated from performing arts school, rebuffed a gig as a backup dancer for Prince, and moved to Charlotte from her family's home in Newport, Rhode Island—soaked up everything Vinroot Poole had to impart. "She taught me how to take any woman who walked through that door and have her leave looking ten million times more beautiful and more confident in herself," Hindmarch says. "I really don't think I'd be doing what I'm doing today without Laura."

That would be running Wiggy Kit, her line of luxury women's wear designed to flatter all shapes, sizes, and skin tones no matter the season or occasion. She founded the company in 2015 after moving back to the U.K. and spending the early aughts working various fashion-world jobs. "For me it's about playing with proportions—where you might place the waistband, or how open you make a neckline, or where you put a seam," she explains of her styles. "If you place a strap at an angle, for example, it makes the shoulders more expansive and narrows the waist and the hips," a design seen on her beloved Apron Dress, which features scalloped straps that float down the bodice and over the skirt. "You can completely and utterly trick the eye and emphasize the physique to the wearer's advantage."

"Her clothes are easy and flattering and fit just so," says Vinroot Poole, now one of Wiggy Kit's primary retailers. (Hindmarch will travel to Charlotte and Charleston, South Carolina, this spring for trunk shows.) They're also versatile, thanks to the time the designer splits between her home in London and another on Harbour Island, in the Bahamas. "My wardrobe used to be so chaotic: I had one [set of clothing] I could wear lying barefoot on the beach, where it didn't matter if the pieces were see-through or short, and



Designer Wiggy Hindmarch, wearing items from her spring and summer collection, in her London studio.

another for London, a city where it's completely inappropriate to go to your child's school gates dressed in something like that," she says. "I started thinking: Why can't I have things that work in London that I can also take abroad? I think I've now managed to create something that can do both."

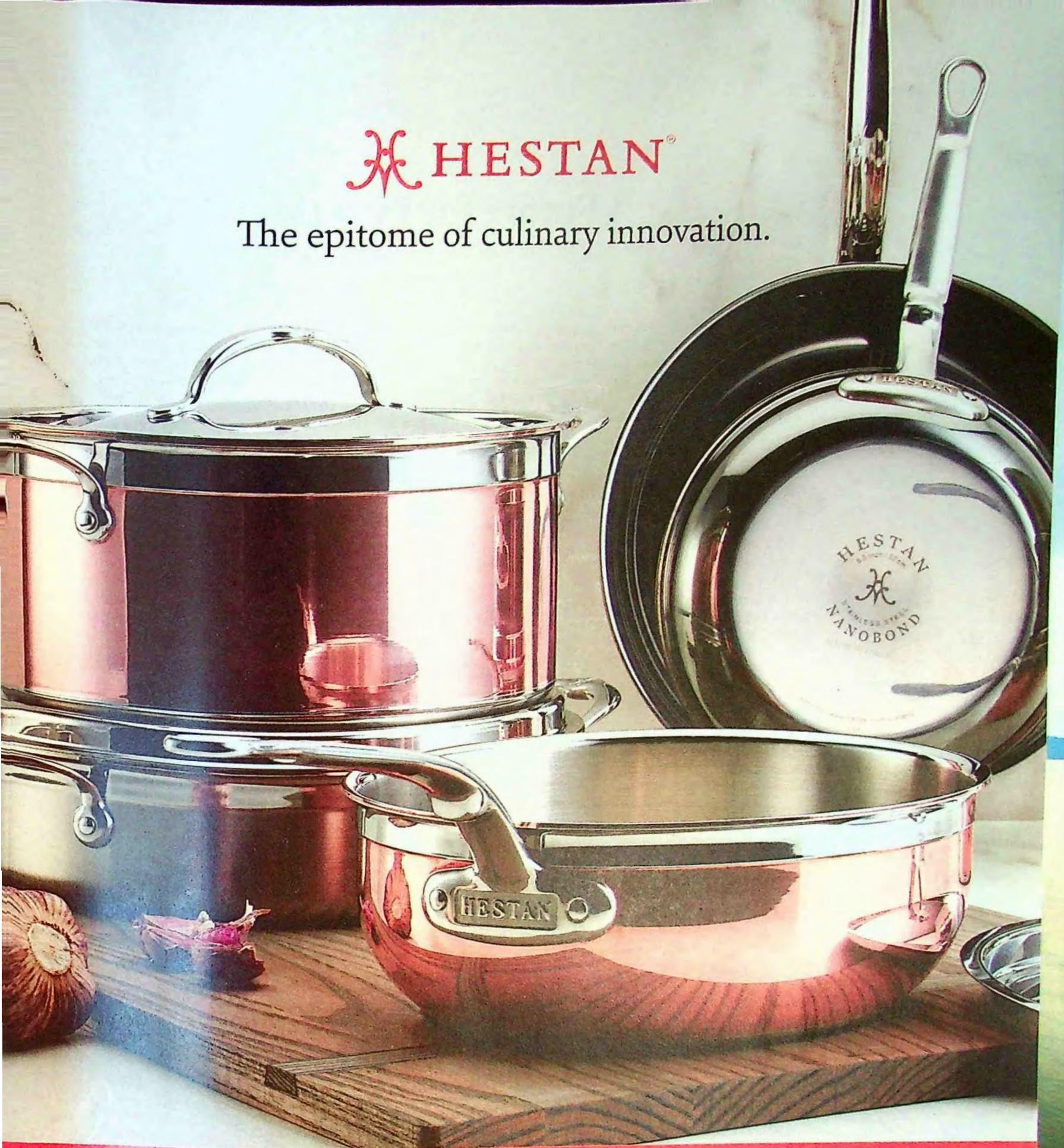
When conceiving her looks, Hindmarch imagines each outfit at a Bahamian dinner or on a Thames-side stroll. But she also considers what Vinroot Poole would sell to her clients. "In the South, women aren't ashamed of taking care of themselves," she says. "They're not afraid to be pretty, and I learned a lot from that. The U.K. and Europe as a whole are slightly grittier and edgier, with a bit less print and color. I've sort of melded the really flattering aesthetic that the Americans have—especially those beautiful women in the South—with a bit of the humor and edgy detailing that come from European style."

Her new spring and summer collection nods to pastoral bliss, a feeling she's also found in the South. "I've been really inspired by places like Blackberry Farm that connect to nature and provide a lifestyle I want to have," she says. That ethos manifests in a dazzlingly slouchy blue jumpsuit; a handful of matching sets—a square-necked top, for instance, meant to pair with complementary gingham shorts or a gaucho skirt, or to get tucked into a favorite pair of jeans; a Chinese-red Eden Dress with ecru rickrack; and flowing blouses in prints derived from a piece of eighteenth-century fabric, "like something you'd find in a Provençal attic," Hindmarch says. Her first-ever jacket designs will debut this season, too. Quilted and reversible, the cocoon jackets are cropped so as not to "kill the outfit," as Hindmarch puts it—an answer to an age-old dilemma faced by women on both sides of the Atlantic. ☐

"In the South, women aren't ashamed of taking care of themselves. They're not afraid to be pretty, and I learned a lot from that"

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A Future for Frosties

A MYSTERIOUS SOUTHERN SALAMANDER FINDS HOPE

By Lindsey Liles

When herpetologist Mark Mandica's thirteen-year-old son peered into an enclosure of frosted flatwoods salamanders in late December 2021 and said, "Dad, there's eggs in there," Mandica didn't believe him. But on closer examination, Mandica spotted the jellylike orbs, attached to blades of grass. "We were overjoyed," Mandica recalls. "We stood in the dark, hugging, because we'd been working toward this for a decade."

Back then, the little-known, little-studied amphibian—once abundant in longleaf pine ecosystems—was nose-diving to extinction. And Mandica, a researcher who pivoted to conservation work in response to global amphibian declines, was all too familiar with species loss: While working as the amphibian conservation coordinator at the Atlanta Botanical Garden, he cared for the last known male Rabbs' fringe-limbed tree frog of Panama. In 2016, the lonely frog—dubbed Toughie—died. "The finality of it was profound, and there was nothing I could do but make him comfortable," Mandica says. "It's still a salt-in-the-wound topic."

That same year, he and his wife, Crystal, started the Amphibian Foundation (AF), a conservation nonprofit, in Atlanta, to focus on the frosted flatwoods salamander (the frostie, for short), a species Mandica had begun searching for a few years before. "I couldn't stand by while we lost one of our own amphibians in the Southeast," he says. The foundation aimed to create a captive colony for a worst-case scenario. Due to the scarcity of longleaf habitat, along with the disruption of the wetlands where the salamanders breed thanks to climate change, just three frostie populations are hanging on in Georgia and Florida. They've suffered a population decline of more than 90 percent since 2000.

Female frosties lay their eggs in dry depressions in the forest near the edges of ephemeral ponds, gambling that the hollow will fill with water and allow the eggs to hatch and enter their aquatic larval phase. Mandica and his team crawled on hands and knees, searching for eggs. They surveyed for larvae, too, and took to the lab those with little chance of survival otherwise. In time, they established the only captive colony in the world ("talk about

pressure," Mandica says). But despite his best efforts to puzzle out the conditions they needed to breed, it took five years for him to finally hit on the right moisture, humidity, and light levels and for eggs to appear.

"He called me that morning, beside himself," recalls Harold Mitchell, the frosted flatwoods salamander species recovery lead for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and a partner in Mandica's efforts. "I wanted to pass out cigars like a new dad. It was a total game changer." Twenty of those eggs reached metamorphosis last summer.

Modeling estimates it'll take an output of 2,800 frosties each year, however, before they can be consistently reintroduced to the wild. "Those are high numbers, but that's the riddle Mark is solving," Mitchell says. "If he can get this to happen regularly and export the methodology, then we start seeing the light at the end of the tunnel to reach recovery." Mandica has sent young salamanders to four partner institutions—a U.S. Fish & Wildlife hatchery in Georgia, Brevard Zoo in Florida, the North Carolina Zoo, and Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium in Nebraska—to start new colonies. And he hopes his own salamanders will breed again this year; about ninety currently reside in a special lab at AF, and another three hundred live in outdoor mesocosms (which re-create their habitat) down the road.

All that effort for an obscure salamander that spends most of its life underground may mystify some, but frosties and their brethren play key ecological roles. Salamanders, more abundant by total mass than mammals and birds combined, prop up ecosystems—preying on invertebrates while being preyed upon by vertebrates. They're little protein packs that feed the forest and lace the food chain together, each species representing an ancient story of evolution tied to the land that shaped them over millions of years. A stunning array live in the Southeast—more than almost anywhere else in the world. They come in all colors and shapes: brilliant red, moss green, wrinkled and brown, sleek and aquatic, fat and terrestrial.

At AF, Mandica shows me a single frostie, just a year old, curled beneath a makeshift log. The male is smooth and black, with delicate toes, big eyes, and sprinkles of icy white tracing fantastic patterns across the body—a secret of the forest most people will never see. The battle for the species' existence will play out quietly, as the effort to breed them in captivity did in this lab. But the fragile creature has the best that the many threatened amphibians of the South can hope for—a team to fight for it, and therefore a fighting chance. ■



One of the frosted flatwoods salamanders bred in captivity, up close (above) and to scale in researcher Mark Mandica's hand.



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TALK OF THE SOUTH



Have a burning question? Email editorial@gardenandgun.com

try to stay clear: Last year, Florida tallied only twenty-five shark bites for a resident-plus-visitor population of some 146 million. That's one bite per 5.8 million people. If that microscopic probability freaks you out, get the kids some rubber shark-fin hats and stick to the motel pool.

How much should I factor jockeys into Derby bets?

Including their five to seven pounds of tack, the Derby three-year-olds can carry 126 pounds max, which means a jockey must weigh no more than 119. At that number or less, jockeys must be rock-hard athletes whose horse sense and racing acumen are honed to guide a 1,200-pound Thoroughbred blasting through the Derby's mad scrum at forty miles an hour. In that fray, a jockey never "sits"; he or she crouches above without touching the saddle, knees and hips taking the brunt of the horse's twenty-foot stride. As the Triple Crown kickoff, drawing huge fields of only lightly experienced runners, the Derby is a skilled pilot's race like no other. John Velazquez is one of just ten jocks to have won the race at least three times. Mike Smith has \$345 million-plus in winnings and has twice taken the Derby. Ira Ortiz Jr. has posted \$268 million in his career, \$37 million of which he hauled in just last year. Smith and Ortiz alone win between 16 and 20 percent of the races they enter. When sculpting your bets, take a hard look at who's in the irons, because all Derby jockeys can ride. If you forget them, they'll sting you.

We tossed our deep fryer years ago but now crave big batches of hush puppies. Suggestions?

Southern deep-fried everything is at the crux of the region's identity, but as with much that is good in this dang world, some things deemed "too much trouble" fall off the chuck wagon. We grab hush puppies by the bushel at barbecue and catfish joints, but home fry-ups happen less often. First, a glance back: South Carolina's renowned Edisto River chef Romeo Govan, born into slavery in the 1840s, bears a strong claim to have invented the cornmeal side as we know it. Govan called it "redhorse bread," after the river redhorse, a starspecies at his celebrated fish fries in the late 1800s. He tossed his cornmeal balls into the lard in which he cooked the fish. I know of one staunch Piedmont home cook—called Grandbunn for her zesty CB handle Cinnamon Bunn—who had to confront the shocking failure of the tradition these days at one of her own fry-ups when her granddaughter blithely confessed she'd never even owned a home fryer. Two tactics will combat such malaise. Surely you have a cast-iron skillet? Use it! It's more honest and inviting than the auto-electro appliance thing. The second tactic is to play hell with the recipe. From Lebanese falafel to Indian bhaji, hush-puppy-like fried dumplings are global. Toss some onions and turmeric into that batter. Chile powder and cilantro, parsley and thyme; doesn't matter which way you punch it, it'll keep your puppies alive and kicking. ☐

ASK G&G

Getting Chummy

SHARK FEARS, JOCKEY BETS, AND HUSH PUPPY HINTS

By Guy Martin

Q Taking the kids to Florida, whose waters lead the world in shark bites. Should we worry? In the hope of cutting back the raging hysteria about sharks at the onset of beach season, allow me to express a bit of shark love. Sharks are apex predators. As barometers of our waters' health, they're among the most elegant and vulnerable species in the ocean's grand lattice. The question is: Why Florida? In ecology, it's called encroachment, as in, the sharks preceded us on the South's seaboard by some 450 million years. No shark can be made to care about Daytona's racetrack, South Beach's nightclubs, the super-trustworthy used beachmobile dealers, or the barely legal shell shops that bezewel Florida. Sharks do care about Miami's Biscayne Bay, because that shallow, warm lagoon serves as a nursery for bull sharks, which are both euryhaline (able to tolerate fresh and salt water) and aggressive. There's also a fine hammerhead nursery there. Are we loving this now? I'm loving it! It gets better: Thousands of blacktip sharks migrate annually between the Chesapeake Bay and South Florida. Like bull sharks, blacktips seek warm water and chase the tons of bait sluiced in by the Gulf Stream. How cool is that? Sharks

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Field of Dreams

WHY GOING NATIVE MAKES MORE SENSE THAN A COMMON FOOD PLOT

By T. Edward Nickens

When Craig Harper was a young technician in the late eighties for a state wildlife agency, he felt like little more than a professional mower. "I got on a tractor and dragged around a bush hog from May to September," he explains. Even though it was nesting and brooding season for rabbits, songbirds, and game birds and fawning season for deer, that was the general prescription for wildlife management. Harper figured there had to be a better way to manage these types of fields, and now, as a professor of wildlife management and the extension wildlife specialist at the University of Tennessee, he's fine-tuning the solution. Instead of endlessly plowing and planting food plots for deer, he partners with Mother Nature to foster native regrowth for maximum benefit to them.

The practice, called "old-field management," turns former food plots, row-crop fields, and pastures into gorgeous, easily huntable, nutrient-rich areas that attract and hold deer, rabbits, butterflies, and songbirds all year long. The natural food base actually supports antler growth that can eclipse what often results from food plants and nutritional supplements. The best part: Compared with traditional food plots for deer, old-fields are easier and cheaper to establish and maintain.

Essentially, creating old-fields requires clearing out the bad stuff and giving nature a little nudge. "You simply kill the stuff you don't want," Harper says, "and leave the stuff you want." By targeting fields with the right herbicide treatments, a landowner with little more than an ATV or a small tractor—or even just a backpack sprayer—can create space so that the naturally occurring seed bank in the soil will germinate and grow into a nutritious smorgasbord of food plants and provide optimal cover that can keep deer moving all day long. Plants such as blackberry, pokeweed, fleabane, and even ragweed are highly sought by deer. "People don't understand how high in food value these native plants are," Harper says.

While converting pastures and fallow fields takes a bit more work, to remove smothering nonnative grasses by intensive spraying, converting an existing food plot or row-crop field is much easier, and brings quicker results, because the grass layer is already gone. To start, use a broad-spectrum herbicide to zap plants such as undesirable or invasive saplings, hon-



White-tailed deer bedded down in a field of native grasses.

seysuckle, sericea lespedeza, common mullein, and any emergent fescue and Bermuda grass. Larger fields can be treated with an ATV-mounted sprayer or a small tractor with a spray gun, smaller fields with a backpack sprayer once or twice a year. And this approach involves far less chemical application than is needed for maintaining food plots, Harper points out.

During the second summer, some spraying will still be required. But by the third summer, Harper says, Mother Nature will have filled in most of the holes. Beneficial plants and shrubs will typically grow four to six feet tall, providing fawning cover in the spring, and hold deer during hunting season. Jason Hewett, owner of Private Land Management in Bluffton, South Carolina, used Harper's techniques while he managed 15,000 acres of Clarendon Farms north of Beaufort. "In the first year, there was so much volunteer goldenrod, ragweed, and dog fennel coming up that a clutch of quail poult or a deer fawn would never be seen," he says. "And you couldn't count the number of songbird and pollinator species you might see." Antler growth at Clarendon exploded.

All along, Harper says, you can fine-tune the old-field to your hunting style and preferences. If you still want to plant food sources, seed firebreaks in annual clovers, winter wheat, oats, or brassica. That will give you a pleasing green strip to watch come hunting season. You can also mow shooting lanes in the new growth. And it's a snap to disc and plant or top-sow food plants if you'd like.

It's also helpful to burn small sections of the field simply using a drip torch and firebreaks. An opening as small as a quarter acre is easy to create, and the young vegetation that will sprout up "will be so palatable and nutritious that deer will flock to it," Harper says.

Many landowners will still want to consult with a local agricultural extension agent or wildlife biologist for details on herbicides, small-plot prescribed burning, and plant identification. But it takes very little training. "We have seen this approach transform field after field after field," Harper says. "The options are so numerous that it makes it fun. People hear about this and they think, *This is something even I could do. And they do it. It really is that straightforward.*"

Essentially, creating old-fields requires clearing out the bad stuff and giving nature a little nudge



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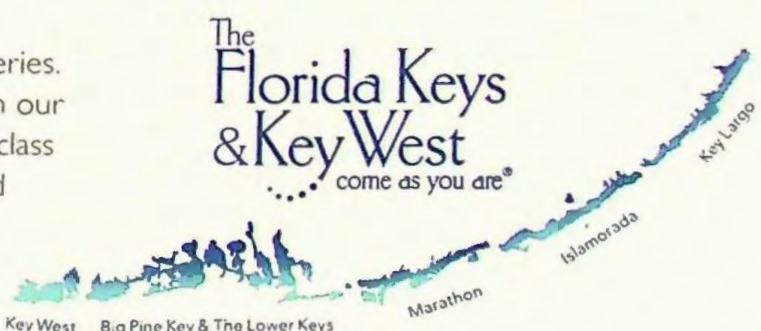
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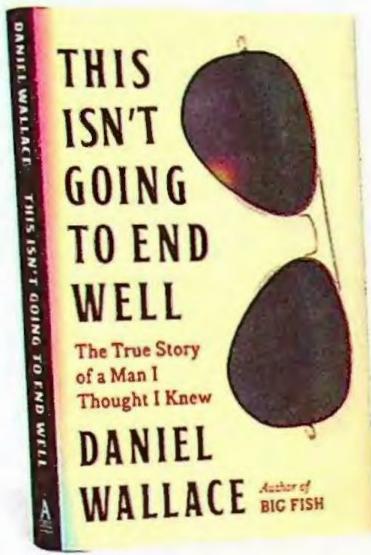
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TALK OF THE SOUTH

■ This Isn't Going to End Well, Algonquin Books, \$28



BOOKS

Man, Myth, Legend

THE AUTHOR OF BIG FISH RECKONS WITH HIS REAL-LIFE IDOL

By Jonathan Miles

William Nealy (1953–2001) wasn't everyone's idea of a role model. He was a river hippie, high school dropout, long-haired rock-and-roll drummer, subculture cartoonist, and impudent devotee of alcohol, tobacco, firearms, and narcotics. He lived on the edge of everything.

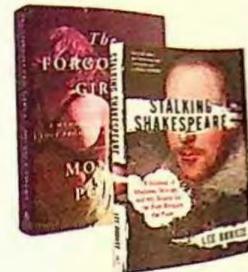
To Daniel Wallace, however, he was flat-out magical. One of Wallace's earliest glimpses, appropriately, was of Nealy in flight: leaping twenty-five feet into a swimming pool from the roof of Wallace's Birmingham, Alabama, home. Watching the teenage Nealy surface in the sloshing pool and recline his head to let the water pull back his corn-yellow hair, Wallace—twelve at the time—found himself instantly spellbound. "It was just the wildness, the derring-do, his willingness to take flight—literally—into the unknown, an openness to experience and chance that so far in my short life had not been previously modeled to me by anyone," Wallace writes in *This Isn't Going to End Well*, a memoir-slash-exegesis-slash-tender, angry elegy. He would come to think of Nealy—his older sister's boyfriend, when they met; later her husband—as "the child of James Dean, Albert Camus, Ernest Hemingway, Keith Richards, Satan, G.I. Joe, and...Clint Eastwood": a heady DNA combo that the young Wallace—and the adult Wallace too—longed to clone, or at least mimic.

Wallace is the celebrated author of a half dozen winsome, often fantastical novels, most famously *Big Fish*. (He has also contributed to *Garden & Gun*.) But he ascribes even that writing career to the influence of Nealy, who published a collection of his white-water-paddling-themed cartoons—think R. Crumb in neoprene—in 1981, the first of ten books. "How did I become a writer?" Wallace asks. "Simple: He wrote books, and so I did too. I had been following him around, in one way or another, since I was twelve, and I had followed him all the way here."

"But who was I really following: William, or his shadow?" Wallace continues. That shadow supplies the book's subtitle—*The True Story of a Man I Thought I Knew*—as well as the grief and rage that vein it. Thirty years after Wallace met him, Nealy committed suicide at the age of forty-eight, an end no one saw coming, least of all Wallace. For years Wallace seethed at what felt like a betrayal, an abandonment; a decade later, one angry moonless night, he dumped Nealy's ashes in the side yard as though emptying a woodstove.

But eventually Wallace came around—reluctantly, uneasily—to reading the twenty-two journals Nealy left behind, in which he discovered a William Nealy that, at first, bore almost no resemblance to the one he'd known, or thought he'd known. This Nealy—haunted by childhood traumas he'd never disclosed, and beset with depression and anxieties he was never able to bridle—"lived in his own secret room, the narrow confines of an interior life with space for only one." The grinning, sunlit man who was "always just a step or two away from some bone-breaking, head-cracking, eye-losing moment, close to death sometimes and more alive because of it," as Wallace writes, had lived far closer to death than anyone knew. "His journals," he writes, "must be the longest suicide note in the history of the world."

What Wallace achieves in *This Isn't Going to End Well* is a hard-wrung reconciliation: between him and Nealy, yes, but also with the public and private selves we all cultivate, selves sometimes woven together and other times, as with Nealy, partitioned. Was Nealy one of the twoselves, Wallace asks, "or both?" And upon which one, Wallace wonders, had he modeled his own persona? The answer, of course, is both, even if Wallace didn't always register it. Every one of his novels—think especially of *Big Fish*—is "about people pretending to be someone they aren't," he realizes, through a new and wider lens. "No one in my books was who they said they were." Wallace's father, a wealthy businessman who considered Nealy a "loser," prided himself on being a "self-made man." But so too was Nealy. And so too is Wallace. "Without William I wouldn't be who I am," he writes, "but I am not him, which is a blessing." *This Isn't Going to End Well* is a heart-cracking exploration of the ways we construct ourselves, and how, despite any facade, no matter how bold, it can all come tumbling apart. □



Personal Papers

Two more standout Southern memoirs

In the shadow of the Ozarks, two childhood best friends played make-believe, fought, made up, and plotted escapes from their tiny Arkansas town. A visceral tell-all,

The Forgotten Girls (Random House) by reporter Monica Potts shares that painful but hopeful story, plus what followed for her and her pal Darcie, weaving in startling new statistics about life expectancy in rural America. Another intensely readable book, this one with bust-out-laughing moments, *Stalking Shakespeare* (Scribner) recounts the Mississippi novelist Lee Durkee's Adderall-fueled spiral into art obsession, his darkest inner monologues while holed up in a Vermont fishing shack, and the daring trip he took to London to find answers for himself.

—CJ Lotz

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Nineteenth-century poet Margaret Elizabeth Sangster wrote "There's nothing half so pleasant as coming home again." This idea is central to Garden & Gun Land. Authentic placemaking is at the heart of what makes the South so special, and to help you find your own little corner of this extraordinary region, we take you on a tour of three properties that embody the Southern spirit in this special section. Each an entirely different offering—one a dreamlike coastal oasis, another a marsh-front escape, and finally the best of bygone lake living—what unites these sites is the uniquely Southern lifestyles they offer. Ready to find your home?



Alys Beach, located in South Walton, Florida, is noted for its Mediterranean-and Moorish-influenced design.



From Holiday to Forever Home

ALYS BEACH INVITES VISITORS TO CONSIDER AN EXTENDED STAY

The Sunset Terrace of the owner-exclusive Beach Club at Alys Beach; Opposite, from top: A rendering of The Leno condominium designed by Hart Howerton; bath house urn on Gulf Green; rendering of the Somersisle Terrace townhouses designed by Khouri Vogt Architects.

Alys Beach glistens in the distance as you drive on Northwest Florida's Scenic Highway 30A along the Emerald Coastline. The white masonry buildings dot the landscape underneath brilliant blue skies. The small-town atmosphere permeates every facet of the community, with winding pedestrian paths, small pockets of green grass, the owner-exclusive Beach Club, and unique shops and restaurants that tumble toward the white sand beaches of the Gulf of Mexico.

Over the past few years, real estate development along 30A has been booming. But Alys Beach hasn't been in a rush, eschewing fast-and-furious development for a more thoughtful, sustainable approach. The master planning of the town dictates a more phased plan for real estate devel-

opment, building out sections over time in a cohesive manner consistent with Alys Beach's hallmark New Urbanist design, one that marries Moorish and Mediterranean elements with the character of Bermuda and the city of Antigua, Guatemala.

No wonder this dreamland appeals to vacationers looking for a taste of modern coastal comfort. For those seeking to experience the Alys Beach community, the best way to get a feel for the town and its luxe charm is through its rental program. From the moment guests arrive at Alys Beach, they are transported to a world where life seems a bit slower, with an air of effortless-ness all around. Rental guests can experience the Alys Beach lifestyle, whether in a home or a condominium, with access to refined amenities, curated shops in Town Center, exceptional dining and drinks, and of course, the

exquisite beaches that draw visitors from around the country. But if you're longing for something a little more long-term, there's never been a better time to make Alys Beach a permanent home.

Condominium living along the Florida Gulf Coast is nothing new, but Alys Beach's approach to development is unorthodox. Multiple architects are involved in the design process, giving each new building a certain flair while maintaining the cohesion of the sun-drenched white walls. With that ethos in mind, Alys Beach welcomes prospective buyers to a unique opportunity for home ownership with the development of condominiums and townhouses in proximity to The Beach Club and Plaza, and Town Center. The amenity-rich condominiums and townhouses will be available as several options: The Lena, The August and The Nora, The Dannelly and The Varian, and the townhouses of Somersisle Terrace.

Situated across from The Beach Club, The Lena embodies the delight and elegance of coastal living at Alys Beach. Generous covered terraces provide front-row seats to daily life on the beach-front Plaza while capturing stunning views of the Gulf's emerald-blue waters. Gracious open plans have been thoughtfully crafted for comfort and

light—each a sun-filled oasis for the perfect home away from home.

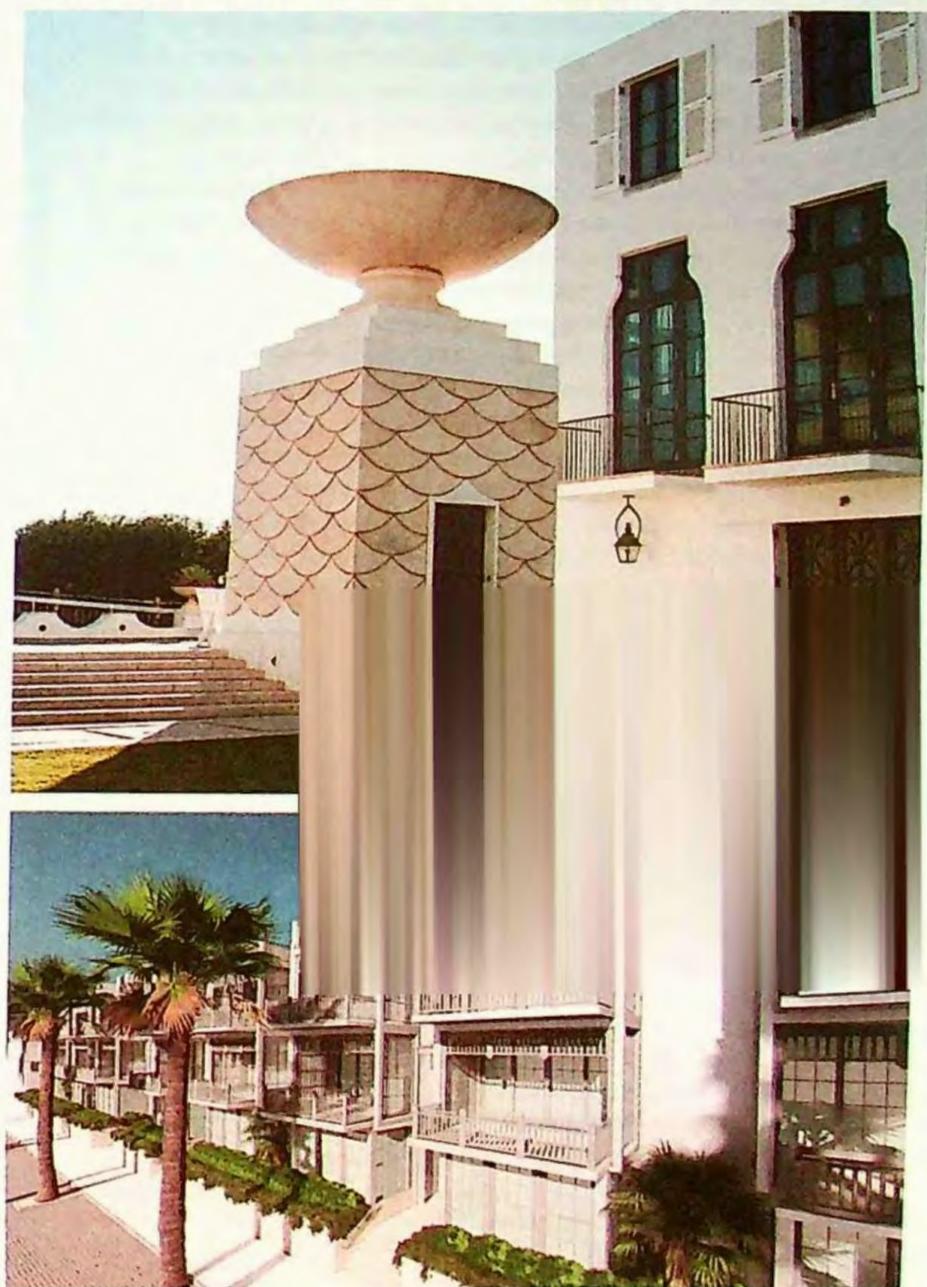
With its three-facade triangular structure on West 22nd Street in Manhattan, the Flatiron is one of the most iconic buildings in the world. With the new developments, The August and The Nora, Alys Beach has taken inspiration from the big city to create a sleek, modern neighborhood. Located in an urban setting, the buildings' most desirable feature may be their narrow ends with large round porches. The two stand on their own, making every residence a corner unit, each with nearly floor-to-ceiling windows and two street exposures. And once inside, there is little sense of adjacent residences.

New options to make Alys Beach home don't end with these recent developments. The Dannelly and The Varian buildings take everything residents love about Alys Beach—its culture, old-world influences, and civic center—and combine that with a clear vision for its future. The Dannelly and The Varian serve as anchor to the heart of Alys Beach, a social center with rich shopping and restaurant experiences, with a tower at the southwest corner of The Dannelly. This area is the crossroads connecting the town square back to the neighborhood to the north and future development to the east, creating a courtyard between The Dannelly and The Varian that will be a significant pedestrian gateway to the core of Alys Beach. The Varian defines the eastern wall of the town center and is primarily west facing. The Cuban and Caribbean details lead to a steeply vaulted arcade in front of ground-floor retail spaces and the shutter-screened balcony porches on each level of residences above.

On Alys Beach's South Somerset Street, which leads from the town center to the Gulf of Mexico, you'll find Somersisle Terrace. Modeled after the grand eighteenth-century terrace row houses of Georgian London, the new townhouses rise four stories above an elevated stoop and landscaped dooryard. Second-floor living affords Gulf views from its front porch and balcony, while an elevated loggia, court, and pool on its west side allow you to enjoy the sunset. Four-bedroom suites are distributed on three floors, with the principal suite afforded a private porch and balcony above a common one below. Above it all, a generous fourth floor sky terrace offers panoramic views overlooking the town and Gulf on all sides.

Once you're in Alys Beach, you'll never want to leave. And with these new offerings for ownership, Alys Beach can help turn your dreams into a reality.

*Explore Alys Beach ownership opportunities
at AlysBeach.com*



Top and bottom images are preliminary renderings; details are subject to change.



A Marsh-Front Oasis

THE LOWCOUNTRY'S KIAWAH RIVER COMMUNITY OFFERS THE BEST OF BOTH MODERN AMENITIES AND THE NATURAL WORLD

When Jamie and Jamie Pagliocco transition from their primary residence in New Hampshire to their riverfront winter retreat in the South Carolina Lowcountry, they trade their busy, car-dependent schedules for slower-paced days filled chiefly with commutes by bike, foot, boat, or golf cart. "It almost feels like cheating if you drive your vehicle to work out," Mrs. Pagliocco says. "It's rare that we use our car."

Walkability and thoughtfully preserved natural vistas to soak up during a stroll are part of the fabric of Kiawah River, the two-thousand-acre master-planned coastal community on Johns Island that the Paglioccos call home September through May.

After vacationing in the Lowcountry for years, the Paglioccos decided in 2018 that it was time to invest in their slice of the region. Though they first looked east of the Cooper River and in downtown Charleston, renderings of the forthcoming Kiawah River community, which is situated on the banks of the eponymous river, caught their eye. "There was not a tuber in the ground when we came and looked at it, and it was only by chance that [sales executive] David Nelson was available," Mrs. Pagliocco recalls. "He said, 'If you can get here within the hour, I can show you around.' And at the end of that hour, we put an offer in on our lot."

The Paglioccos' nearly half-acre waterfront property backs up to a vibrant tributary teeming with wildlife. To bring their vision of a riverfront retreat to life, they enlisted a talented team fluent in coastal cottage vernacular: architect Beau Clowney, Structures Building Company, and interior designer Allison Elebash. Kiawah River provides property owners with a thoughtfully curated selection of best-in-class vendors to choose from, a helpful perk for those unfamiliar with the area, notes Mrs. Pagliocco.

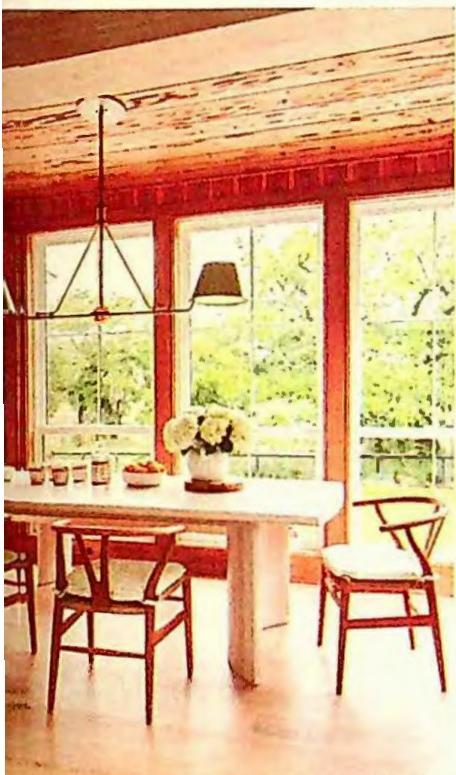
The couple envisioned a cool, comfy, coastal aesthetic for their interior, which Elebash delivered with aplomb. Natural textures, brass accents, and original artwork add warmth and eclectic charm to a base palette of soothing blues and verdant greens. The crisp white exterior of the four-bedroom property—which is spacious enough to comfortably fit the couple, their three adult children, and two dogs—is complemented by a low-maintenance landscape designed by Wertimer + Cline.

Clockwise from near right: Indigenous seagrasses fill the couple's front lawn (photo by Peter Frank Edwards); a second-story outdoor room over the pool (photo by Julia Lynn); the private patio, bordered by the outdoor kitchen and creek (photo by Peter Frank Edwards); the dining room serves as an elegant tree house (photo by Julia Lynn); a sunlit butler's pantry (photo by Julia Lynn).





*"We really love
the community here"*



The study offers a place for Mr. Pagliocco and visiting children to work remotely, while the open-concept kitchen, living, and dining space often brims with activity. A wall of windows along the back of the house ushers in dappled sunlight and affords calming views of the river and the varied species that call the tidal marsh home. Roseate spoonbills and other wading birds are often spotted. "A couple of days ago, two eagles landed in the oak tree in our backyard," notes Mrs. Pagliocco. "And we always love to watch the dolphins."

The social nature of the community has been an unexpected delight for the couple. Generous porches on the front and back of the house draw the family outside whenever the weather allows. And the backyard's temperature-controlled pool and covered kitchen and dining area host frequent get-togethers with family and friends. "We go to happy hour most Friday nights at the Spring House where we like to hang out with current homeowners and those who are in various stages of construction at Kiawah River," Mrs. Pagliocco says. "We really love the community here."

While the house serves as an idyllic home base, the Paglioccos don't typically spend their days indoors. Every morning, they walk through their back gate to take the dogs for a stroll along Kiawah River's twenty-mile trail system. They may bike to the marsh-front Spring House to meet friends for a poolside lunch or to take an exercise class. "And we're just thirty minutes door-to-door from Charleston," Mrs. Pagliocco says, noting that they take advantage of the Holy City's culinary riches often.

Yet when the weather's right and the tide is high, the Paglioccos are on the water. Mr. Pagliocco is a seasoned fly fisherman and was drawn to the community's private boat ramp, just two minutes from their house. With thriving estuaries, uncrowded waters, and a healthy redfish population, the Kiawah River is an angler's paradise. While the tributary that flows behind their house is a productive area to fish, Mr. Pagliocco generally spends his time exploring the tidal plains of the Kiawah River. "My husband enjoys the search as much as the fishing itself and the diversity of wildlife on the river and the challenge of learning a new fishery is exciting."

After a day on the water, the couple might swing by the Goatery to pick up some farm-fresh eggs or bike through the community's hundred-acre working farm to say hello to its chickens, donkeys, and cows. "We love the agrihood aspect," Mrs. Pagliocco says, noting that they enjoy the bounty from the onsite farm through CSA boxes each harvest season. Once the Dunlin Auberge Resort opens its doors within Kiawah River next year, the self-proclaimed foodies plan to dine there often—then take advantage of the easy commute home. "It's just beautiful here, it really is," Mrs. Pagliocco says. "And not having to get in your car is fabulous."

Explore Kiawah River homesites at KiawahRiver.com



Life Is Good on the Lake

RUSSELL LANDS CELEBRATES LAKE MARTIN
LIVING WITH ITS NEW HERITAGE DEVELOPMENT

Let's head to the lake!" It's a clarion call for generations of families across the country, an activity that creates long-lasting memories of roasting s'mores, jumping off the dock, and sleeping peacefully under the stars after a long day on the water. Located in the middle of the triangle formed by Montgomery, Alabama, Birmingham, and Atlanta rests Russell Lands, which for more than five decades has hosted vacationers on the shores of Lake Martin, a 40,000-acre man-made lake, one of the largest in the country, boasting crystalline blue water, bountiful wildlife, and 880 miles of shoreline.

Russell Lands has a long history with Lake Martin. The real estate development firm was founded by Benjamin "Mr. Ben" Russell—founder of the Russell Corporation,

bama, and it's spectacular." The title goes back to Alabama Executive Order #54, which established the Treasured Alabama Lakes designation and honors lakes that have met high water quality standards. Lake Martin was chosen as the first lake to receive the title. It remains the only lake to have this exceptional classification.

The Heritage will include roughly 250 waterfront homesites, 130 wooded interior lots, as well as Wicker Point Golf Club, the first Bill Coore & Ben Crenshaw-designed golf course in Alabama. It's the pinnacle of Southern lake living. The Heritage features large lot sizes with privacy ensured by the towering Alabama pines that line the streets and fairways. The first phase of The Heritage's development began in the summer of 2022, and only four lots remain available for purchase. The second phase is currently underway and will add thirty-one lots soon, followed by additional phases. Homeowners can work with The Heritage's list of preferred architects and builders or bring in their own, pending board approval. The Heritage was designed to provide a comprehensive Lake Martin experience, ensuring that waterfront properties maximize unparalleled water views. Many off-water properties offer

Wicker Point Golf Club under construction. Opposite, from top: A lake home interior with 180-degree water views; twilight at a lake home.

distant views of the private Wicker Point Golf Club course, the centerpiece of The Heritage community.

Avid golfers are likely familiar with a Coore & Crenshaw design, but any person interested in conservation might also be. The company's principals are stewards of the land, never carving out a course where it doesn't belong but instead letting the landscape dictate what form it will take. "Their reputation is unparalleled in responsible design," Lamberth says. "You don't tell them where to put a golf course; they tell you where it might fit." For Wicker Point, Coore walked the woods of The Heritage for days before settling on a peninsula that juts in and out of the shoreline. Lake Martin lies at the very end of the Appalachian Mountains, so naturally, the Wicker Point topography is varied (the course is scheduled to open in fall 2023). The front nine winds its way through hardwood forests and natural creeks with varying elevations, while the back nine is a mix of pine plantations and golf holes adjacent to Lake Martin. The Coore & Crenshaw ethos is that it designs courses that are eminently playable by all skill levels, which certainly holds for Wicker Point. A new golfer can go for it on the par-three eighth while the low handicappers could try to bomb a drive to reach the green in two on the par-five fifteenth.

The laid-back elegance of the Wicker Point Golf Club clubhouse matches the natural setting of the course. The Craftsman-style building features a unique stone foundation where wood beams and walls sit and contribute to a refined but welcoming atmosphere. Golfers can relax after a round with a cocktail while seated on the clubhouse's wraparound porch that affords views of Lake Martin in the distance. In the adjacent golf shop, luxurious locker rooms await, and both men's and women's include a "wind-down room" complete with a bar.

Just up the shoreline from Wicker Point is The Heritage's other signature amenity. The Benjamin is a waterfront residential lake club owned by The Heritage homeowners. It features a fully equipped fitness center, a large saline pool with an adjacent grill area, and eight tennis courts with a dedicated pro shop as well as eight pickleball courts. The grounds of The Benjamin are dotted with small pavilions, firepits, cozy areas for outdoor dining, and a lawn that rolls into the beach area on Lake Martin.

It really is all about the lakeside experience at Russell Lands. Lake Martin is a place where families return again and again to fondly conjure old memories and create new, memorable moments. Russell Lands invites you to add to your heritage by owning a piece of theirs.

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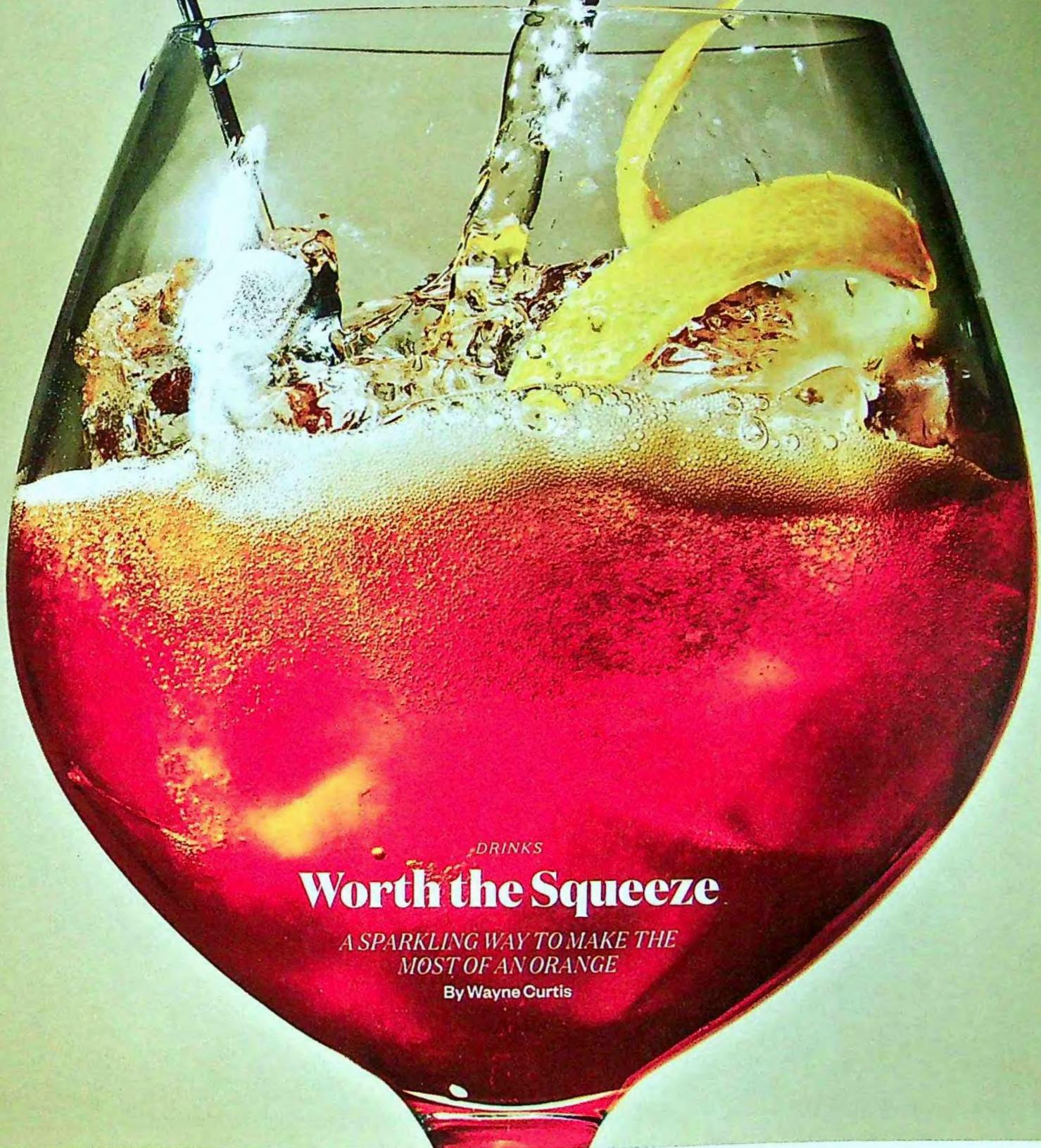
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JUBILEE



DRINKS

Worth the Squeeze

A SPARKLING WAY TO MAKE THE
MOST OF AN ORANGE

By Wayne Curtis



If I asked you to name an adult beverage made with orange juice, and if I were a betting man, I'd wager you'd say "screwdriver" or "mimosa." (If you said "tequila sunrise," I would also place a bet on how old you are and how you spent your twenties.) The mimosa in particular is everywhere, the doyenne of brunch. It's a fun, innocuous drink that likes to swan about in the daytime, as if wearing a caftan.

Otherwise, orange juice often gets relegated to a side role in cocktails. Some fine OJ concoctions have surfaced over time—the Bronx, the Income Tax Cocktail, the Ward Eight, the Monkey Gland—yet none have found a lasting perch in the popular imagination. It's all but impossible to think of modern cocktail culture without lemon and lime juice. But orange juice? It's a morning staple and then calls it a day well before the sun sets.

No surprise, really. In the citrus world, lemon and lime juice both bring a welcome acidity to cocktails, lending them defining edges and a parry for sweetness. Oranges have far less acidity and can therefore render a drink soft and flabby instead. That's not to say the flavor of orange isn't welcome. But peels often provide the tang. Orange skins exude aromatic oils that offer both a sharper and more ethereal taste than juice. Those orange-flavored liqueurs used by mixologists—Cointreau, Grand Marnier, curaçao—all derive their essence from peels macerated in alcohol.

Craft cocktail bartenders also relish adding fresh orange oils at the last minute. They'll grab an orange from a bar-top bowl of citrus, pare a strip of rind, then spritz a cocktail with the peel before setting it upright in the drink, like a sentinel. Orange twists come standard in many of today's most frequently ordered drinks, including the whiskey old-fashioned and the negroni.

Which leads to a problem: The orange peel tends to attract far greater demand than the juice inside. This imbalance produces what Chall Gray, one of the proprietors of Little Jumbo in Asheville, calls "an age-old utility problem, one that bartenders have had to deal with forever." That is, cocktail bars find themselves with a surplus of oranges without peels, which lie about unloved in their skivvies. Gray set about solving this dilemma by devising a pleasing drink that would use the juice from the otherwise wasted fruit.

The Long Hello premiered in the spring of 2021, just as Gray was reopening the bar after an extended pandemic shutdown. ("It had been closed three hundred and eighty-seven days," he says, "not that I was counting.") He sought to concoct something refreshing like an Aperol spritz, "but with more flavor and depth."

He found it. The drink forms the ideal bridge between the wintry citrus season and summer. The double-barreled punch of Cynar (an artichoke-forward Italian amaro) and Aperol gives the orange notes something to stand upon, and the bubbles of cava and club soda confer the effervescence of impending spring. It's worth a wave, whether you're saying hello or goodbye. ☐

The Long Hello

Yield: 1 cocktail

INGREDIENTS

1 oz. Cynar
½ oz. Aperol
1½ oz. orange juice, freshly squeezed
3 oz. cava or prosecco
1 oz. club soda
Lemon twist, for garnish

PREPARATION

Place all ingredients except garnish into a large wineglass half filled with ice, then stir to combine. Garnish with a lemon twist.

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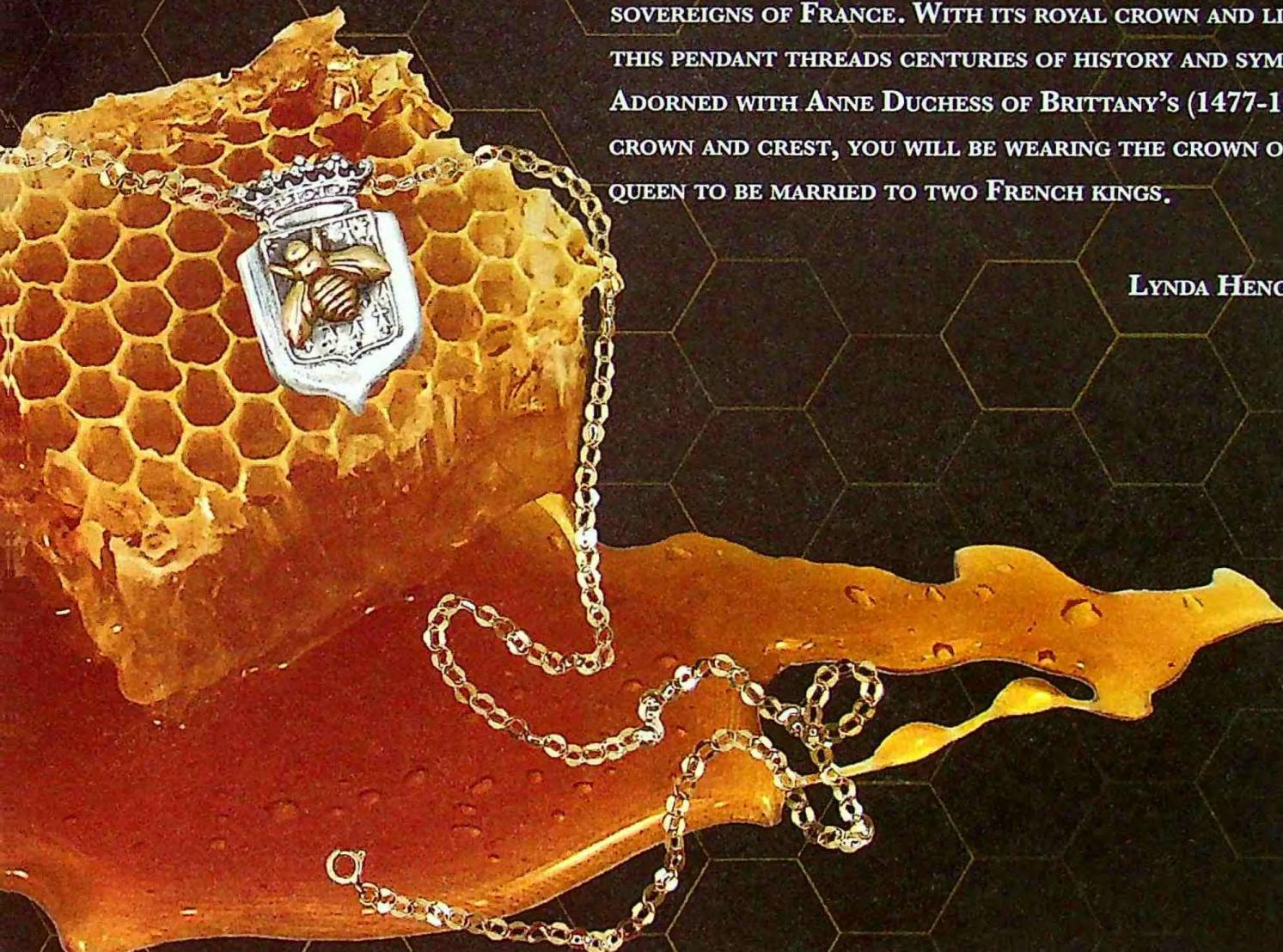
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ANATOMY OF A CLASSIC

Softie Landing

CHEF BRANDON SHARP EMBRACES THE FLAVORS OF HOME IN HIS WINNING ODE TO SOFT SHELL CRAB SEASON

By Kim Severson

Anyone who has spent time cooking in California knows the Golden State offers an abundance of flavor. But there are some things it just can't duplicate. Soft-shell crabs are one. Texas Pete, the hot sauce made in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, is another.

Chef Brandon Sharp, who in 2016 left his cooking career in California and moved back to his home state of North Carolina with his wife, Elizabeth, puts the two together in a restaurant-quality take on softies that is surprisingly easy to execute at home, if you don't mind a little time with hot oil.

Sharp, who grew up in Greensboro, started his career at a Mexican chain restaurant when he was in high school. He went on to attend both the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York, before cooking his way up the ladder, including stints at the French Laundry in Yountville, California, and Restaurant August in New Orleans. In 2007, he became executive chef at Solbar, a restaurant at the then new Napa Valley resort Solage, where he pulled down seven consecutive Michelin

stars. But when the resort was sold, North Carolina was calling. "I missed my family, and I missed the South," he says. Chapel Hill, where his mother was born and his grandmother lived most of her life, "has always been my family's spiritual home." He and Elizabeth opened their restaurant Hawthorne & Wood there in 2019, and last July they added Bluebird, a French bistro.

At Hawthorne & Wood, Sharp makes good use of soft-shells, which are so popular that some customers insist they get a call alerting them when they appear on the menu. Softie season varies by location, depending on water temperature, but in North Carolina it usually starts around late March and runs into June. If you can't get fresh ones, you can easily find frozen softies online.

Sharp likes to coat them in buttermilk and toss them in a lightly seasoned mix of flour and cornmeal, then slip them into a pot of hot oil. Once they're crispy, he dips each crab in a perfectly balanced sweet-hot gastrique made from Texas Pete, ketchup, vinegar, and sugar, and serves it atop a tangle of pickled spring vegetables. He likes a mix of veggies, such as kohlrabi and daikon radish, that retain a bit of crunch in the salty-sugary bath that turns them into his version of chowchow. "I'm a huge fan of quick cold pickles," he says.

As for the frying, make sure to heat the oil fully before dropping in the crabs so they don't come out soggy, and watch out for splatters. "Sometimes those claws will pop and send out a shot of oil at you," he says. And though Sharp loves this recipe with softies, the chowchow and gastrique could play beautifully with all kinds of Southern seafood. "When I was in California, I always pined for East Coast fish and shellfish," he says. "The variety is phenomenal, and it's really fun to cook with." ☐



MEET THE CHEF: BRANDON SHARP

Hometown:
Greensboro, North Carolina

Tips for home cooks:
Use more fresh lemon in whatever you're making. Also, find your ideal vinaigrette recipe and memorize it, then riff on it with different acids. "There are endless possibilities."

Favorite restaurants to go to with his wife and business partner, Elizabeth:
"We tend to go places where we can graze across the menu. We end up with a bunch of dishes on the table."

Soft-Shell Crab with Texas Pete Gastrique and Spring Chowchow

Yield: 6 servings

INGREDIENTS

For the chowchow:
1 medium daikon radish, cut into 2-inch batons
½ head green cabbage, cored and shaved thin on a mandoline
1 cucumber, peeled, seeded, and cut into 2-inch batons
1 large kohlrabi, peeled and cut into 2-inch batons
1 Fresno or jalapeño pepper, seeded and sliced very thin
½ cup salt
2 cups sugar
6 cups distilled white vinegar

For the gastrique:

¼ cup sugar
½ cup distilled white vinegar
¾ cup ketchup
½ cup Texas Pete hot sauce

For the crabs:

6 soft-shell crabs
1 cup all-purpose flour
1 cup medium yellow cornmeal
1 tbsp. salt
2 cups buttermilk
Vegetable oil, such as canola or peanut
1 bunch fresh dill, stemmed and picked into small sprigs

PREPARATION

For the chowchow:
Place the cut vegetables in a large metal bowl. Bring the salt, sugar, and vinegar to a boil and pour over vegetables. Let the chowchow cool for a few minutes at room temperature, then refrigerate. Once fully cool, gently strain off the liquid and set the chowchow aside.

For the gastrique:

Bring sugar and vinegar to a boil. When it's boiling hard, remove from heat and whisk in ketchup and hot sauce. Let cool at room temperature. (The sauce can be made ahead of time. If making the day before, refrigerate it.)

For the crabs:

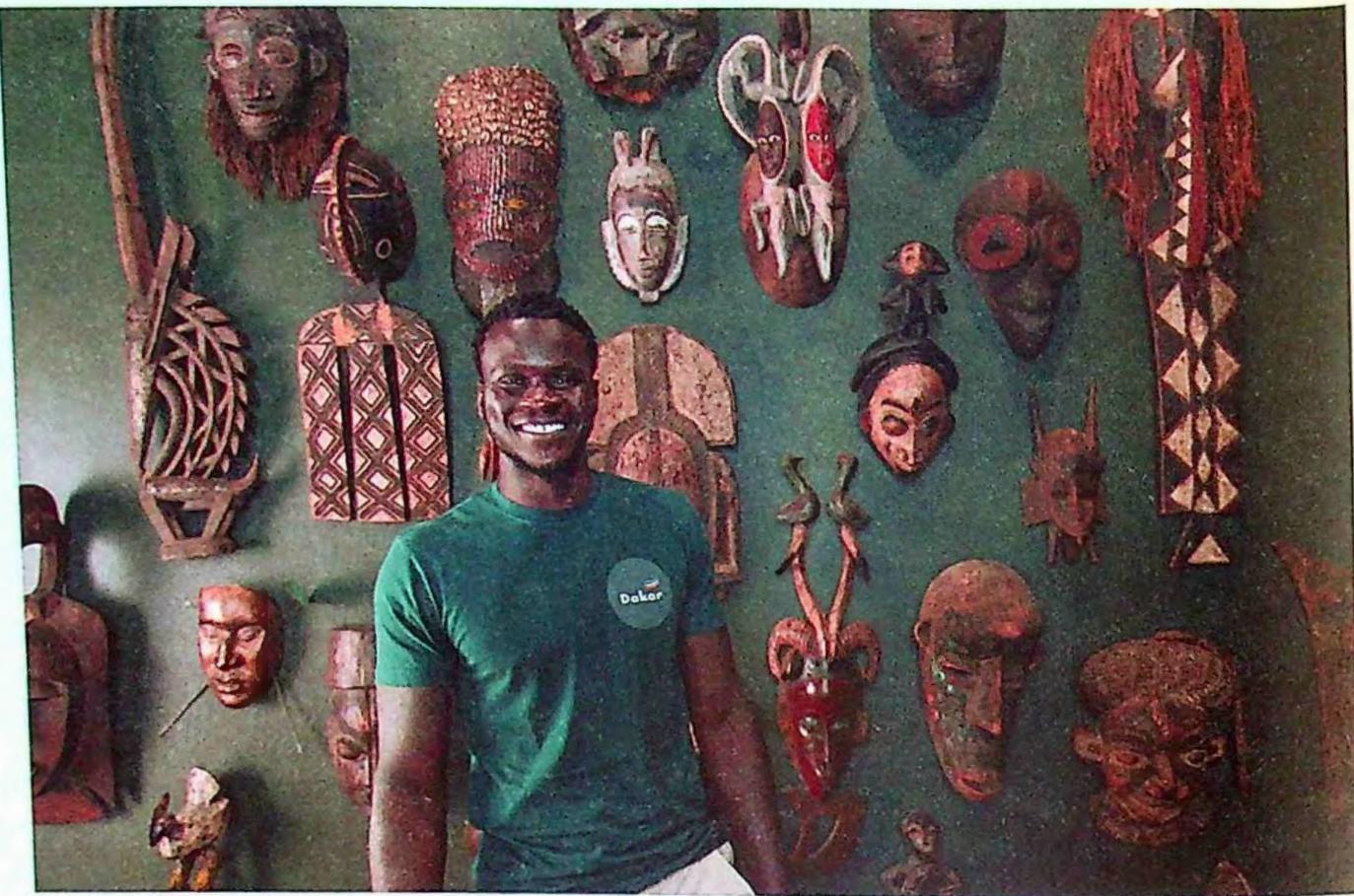
If the crabs haven't been cleaned,

use kitchen shears to remove the face, gills, and posterior apron. Whisk together flour, cornmeal, and salt in a shallow bowl. Pour buttermilk into another shallow bowl. Fill a Dutch oven about halfway with oil and heat to 350°F.

Dip each crab in the buttermilk, then toss gently in the cornmeal mixture to coat evenly. Gently slide the crabs upside down into the hot oil. Fry for 2 minutes, then gently flip and fry 1 minute more. Drain crabs on layers of paper towels and sprinkle with salt.

To serve, place a portion of chowchow on each plate, gently dunk each crab into the gastrique to coat well, and place on top of the chowchow. Garnish generously with fresh dill and serve immediately.





TASTEMAKER

South by Senegal

CHEF SERIGNE MBAYE CONNECTS WEST AFRICA AND THE SOUTH ONE DISH AT A TIME

By Adrian Miller

AGE: 29

HOME BASE:

New Orleans

KNOWN FOR: Serigne Mbaye is the chef of Dakar NOLA, his new thirty-seat tasting-menu restaurant on Magazine Street. Introducing diners to a changing array of dishes such as gulf shrimp in a tamarind sauce and thiakry pie with pecans and mint tea ice cream, the James Beard Award nominee is putting the Crescent City back in touch with its Senegalese roots.

Childhood immersion: "I was born in Harlem, but when I was young, my parents sent me to a boarding school in Senegal [where they are from]. That's one of the first places where I started to learn to cook Senegalese food. I stayed there until I was fifteen." **Culinary genes:** "My mother [Khady Kante] had a restaurant in Harlem [Touba Taif] that closed before I was born. That didn't stop her from cooking. Many people came to our house for a taste of home, especially jollof rice." **Going pro:** "By the time I was eighteen, I was working in restaurants. I washed dishes for a year at the Harrison in New York City and gradually worked my way up. Everything was just a blur, and I wanted to learn everything." **Formal education:** "I went to the New England Culinary Institute in Vermont, and it was a culture shock for sure. But I was used to that. Everywhere I go I'm usually an outsider." **His own path:** "I did a pop-up restaurant for a couple of years pre-COVID, and people were digging my food. So I got a business partner [Effie Richardson] who believed in me. She's a pediatric dentist and has Ghanaian heritage. She understood my vision." **Restaurant mission:** "We cook to nurture the soul. That saying is on the back of the shirt worn by every cook in the restaurant. Every soul needs healing, and food is the best way to heal." **Signature dish:** "We have something on the menu called the Last Meal. Our [enslaved] ancestors from Senegambia were forced to eat black-eyed peas and palm oil as a way to fatten them up for the Middle Passage. A variation is the first meal we serve. It's a reminder that without remembering the people before us, we can't acknowledge the present and the future." **A communal experience:** "I don't really call us a restaurant. I think of it as my mom's throwing a dinner party and I've invited you over. Southern food was inspired by West Africa, but few give West Africa credit. Our ancestors didn't eat fancy. They ate to get fulfilled. A white chef's coat is not my culture. My people sat on the floor, and they ate together." ☑

Serigne Mbaye with a collection of African masks on display at Dakar NOLA.

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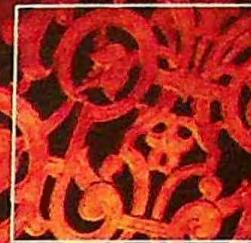


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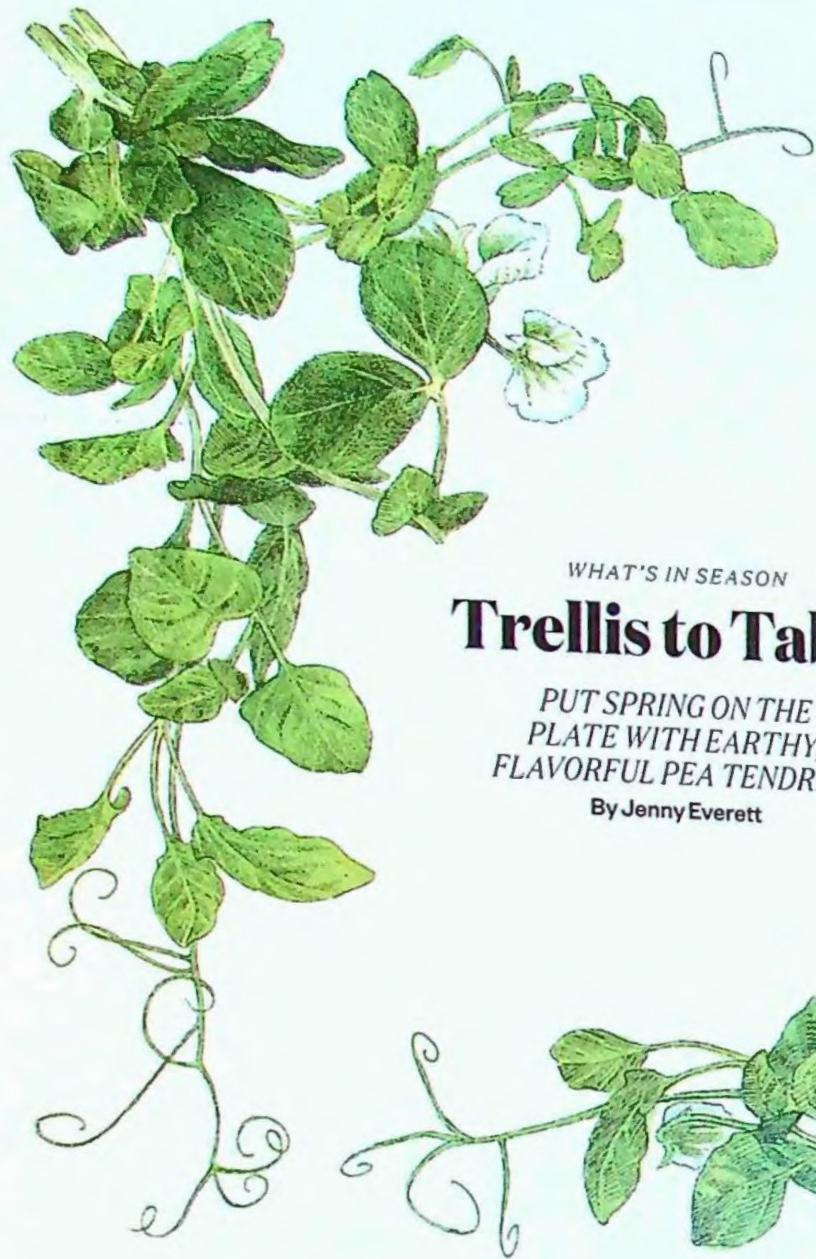


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WHAT'S IN SEASON

Trellis to Table

PUT SPRING ON THE PLATE WITH EARTHY, FLAVORFUL PEA TENDRILS

By Jenny Everett



THE CHEF RECOMMENDS...

Pea Tendril Salad with Honey-Thyme Vinaigrette

Yield: 2 to 4 servings

INGREDIENTS

2 cups pea tendrils, gently washed
3 radishes, shaved
½ shallot, chopped
2 lemons, zested and juiced
3 tbsp. Dijon mustard
4 tbsp. honey
3 tbsp. apple cider vinegar
6 sprigs thyme, leaves removed and chopped
6 sprigs parsley, leaves removed and chopped
2 cups extra-virgin olive oil

PREPARATION

In a mixing bowl, combine pea tendrils and radishes. Place shallot, lemon juice and zest, Dijon mustard, honey, apple cider vinegar, thyme leaves, and parsley leaves in a blender. Blend until smooth. Then, with blender on low, slowly add olive oil until well combined. Drizzle pea tendrils and radishes with 2 tbsp. vinaigrette. Refrigerate remaining dressing in a sealed jar.

The first time Davis Hood heard about pea tendrils, he was working at a restaurant near his hometown of Isle of Palms, South Carolina. "Our chef brought them into the kitchen, and the vibrant green color immediately caught my eye," he says. "I asked him what they were and why he was using them. His simple answer was 'They taste like spring.'" Seventeen years later, as the executive chef of Sullivan's Fish Camp right down the road on Sullivan's Island, Hood still gets excited when his kitchen gets a delivery of fresh shoots. "It is indeed our sign that spring has sprung."

The young, tender shoots of the pea plant, tendrils have a sweet, earthy flavor—somewhere between a pea and spinach—and you can eat the leaves, blossoms, and crunchy hollow stems that curl up the trellis. Just treat them like any other leafy green vegetable by mixing

them into stir-fries, wilting them into soups, or simply sautéing them with garlic for an easy side. If Hood is prepping them, you're most likely to find them raw in a salad (see recipe) paired with another star of spring: radish. "What grows together, goes together," he says. "A salad with tendrils and shaved radish goes really well with any seafood—soft-shell crab, a fillet of mild white flaky fish such as flounder or mahi mahi, or even crab cakes." If you're growing the shoots yourself, harvest them when they've climbed twelve to eighteen inches. (Tip: To send an extra punch of pea flavor to the tendrils, pinch off a few blooms when they first emerge.) Pea shoots are also available fresh at grocery stores (look for them near other microgreens) and farmers' markets throughout spring. The tendril coils should be bright green and springy, with no dark or slimy spots. "When fresh, they are truly a beautiful item," Hood says. "To me there is no more iconic spring produce." ☐

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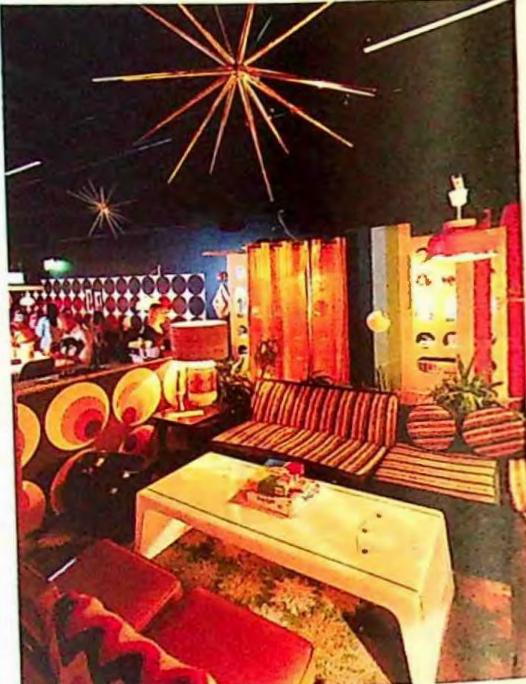
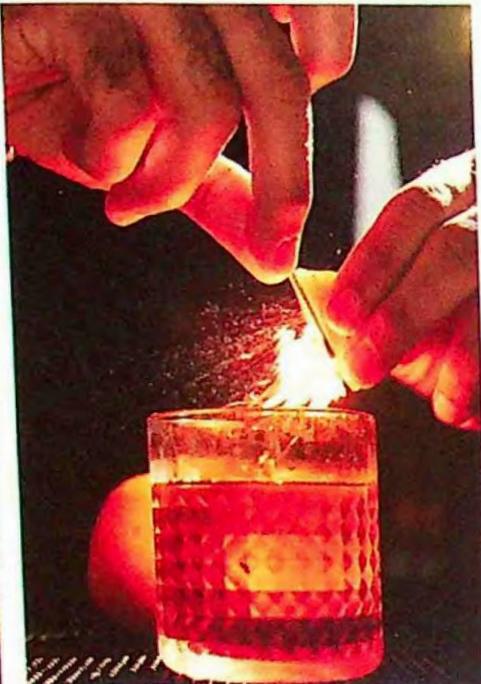
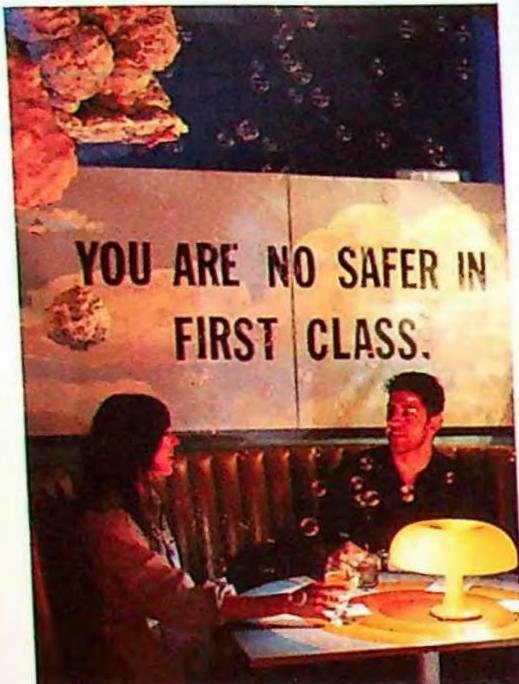
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BY JOHN T. EDGE

Drink In the Show

FORK in
the ROAD

COCKTAIL DEN MEETS LIVING ART INSTALLATION AT THE HOUSE OF FOUND OBJECTS



Feizal Valli pushes aside a thatch of plastic reeds and steps through a green curtain printed with ferns and banana plants. Black-and-gray haircut in a modest pompadour, he wears black jeans and a black coat. From the Jungle Room at his new cocktail bar, set with backlit wildlife dioramas, he climbs wooden stairs bolted together like a high school shop class project.

"We're going backstage," Valli says as he ducks to enter a low-ceilinged three-table hideaway that overlooks the backside of his bar, the House of Found Objects, which opened last November in a downtown Birmingham storefront. "We like to blur the line between patrons and employees. Here, we're all actors in the play."

Below, clouds made of chicken wire and spray-foam insulation twirl on a ceiling mount above the main bar like a merry-go-round. Toy planes jut from those gray and white blobs, cartoon metaphors for the collision of soaring aspirations and everyday life. Thrift shop black-and-white televisions, tucked in knickknack shelves, broadcast aphorisms that inspire and confound, such as YOU ARE ONLY EVER AT WAR WITH YOURSELF.

From left: Bubbles deployed by owner Feizal Valli float amid patrons; the Legendary Sex Panther cocktail, which comes with a temporary tattoo; take a load off in the Lounge.

Toward the rear, a rack of Elvis costumes stands opposite a selection of animal costumes, including a pink pig and an electric blue Cookie Monster. Beneath a second set of stairs that leads to a mezzanine, where couples play UNO and Cards Against Humanity, perches a Superman statuette printed with the slogan YOU ARE NOT REQUIRED TO BE INVINCIBLE.

Valli built this bar to stage a show that stars his regulars. It's working. In early January, a woman put on that pig costume, took a seat in a nook beneath the cloud mobile, typed out a poem on a baby blue electric typewriter, and "mailed" it by dropping the index card in a black metal mailbox. (Valli collects the cards once a week and aims to publish a book of poems written by customers.) Two weeks later, a woman named Devin O'Neal ordered a drink called a Devin O'Neal, made in a coupe glass with pineapple rum and Earl Grey tea, and turned to see the black-and-white silent film she recorded in the video booth play across a giant screen mounted behind the bar.

In those moments, as regulars step into their roles, Valli sees his fever dream come true: "This is a play we cast nightly," he says, handing over a boozy cocktail in an oversize rocks glass with an iceberg cube. "This is a large-scale art installation with a liquor license."

Since moving from New Orleans in 2005, chased by Hurricane Katrina, Valli has built out three spots in Birmingham. First came the Collins Bar, which still operates a block away. There, he installed a wall chart of the periodic table that replaced abbreviations for chemical elements with abbreviations for Birmingham places and people. Next came the much-loved and now-closed Atomic Lounge, where he conceived an Alabama-centric mural done in the style of the *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album cover. Under Valli's spell, Atomic regulars transformed over the course of a night, propelled by stiff cocktails and a closet of thirty-plus costumes, free for the wearing. While costumes are still a part of Valli's formula, his efforts now add up to something more. At the House of Found Objects, his nightly productions say to regulars, *You are weird, you are seen, and we are in this together.*

To pay tribute to patrons like O'Neal, Valli names his drinks after them. A Jack Crumpton, made with bourbon, Averna, and Campari, gets a sawtooth-cut lemon garnish secured with a miniature clothespin and a descriptor of "aggressive, stoic, dry" that applies to the drink and its namesake. Order a Cameron Champion ("sparkly, smooth, enticing") and you get a bottled cocktail made with tequila, pomegranate liqueur, and grapefruit soda. The Legendary Sex Panther, the only

Valli drink that isn't named for a customer, is a riff on an old-fashioned, made with bourbon and chicory liqueur, served with a temporary panther tattoo and a moistened towelette. "The application is key," he says. "That requires a kind of intimacy that bonds people."

While many bars revolve around televisions, turned to sports or news, Valli's big screen serves a different purpose. By late January, two months into the life of his new bar, patrons had recorded more than six hundred short and soundless black-and-white videos like the one O'Neal made. Flashing by in rapid succession, they play like a community portrait. A bald man gives himself what appears to be a pep talk while pointing at the camera. A woman with a pierced right nostril pulls off her false eyelashes. A boy of twelve, the son of a bartender at a nearby bar, grins and gesticulates, showing such aplomb and urgency that the crowd goes quiet to watch.

YOU ARE FIGHTING SOMEONE ELSE'S WAR, reads the legend printed on the check-pad cover for O'Neal's bill. YOUR DAYS ARE NUMBERED! says the slogan printed on her receipt. Every prop Valli designed and built for this bar serves as a prompt to consider. As patrons watch videos of regulars, drinking cocktails named for regulars, he suggests roles to play as we move through his bar and our world, crossing over from lost to found. ☐

Mexico City Sips

Adiōs channels the deeper South

After bonding at a fundraiser for immigrant rights, José Medina Camacho and Jesús Méndez, a fellow DACA recipient, opened their Mexico City-inspired cocktail lounge, *Adiōs*, in Birmingham last fall. Built on bases of reposado tequilas and village-specific mezcals, the elegant cocktails get garnishes of pickled nopales and scatters of Tajín seasoning. Best is Camacho's Miel de Maguey, a martini-ish drink made with raicilla, a wild-fermented agave spirit from Jalisco.—JTE

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COLLECTIONS

Fishing Expedition

THE FOREMOST COLLECTOR OF KENTUCKY REELS TROLLS AUCTIONS,
MEETS, AND ANTIQUE STORES FOR HIS QUARRY

By Monte Burke

GOOD HUNTING

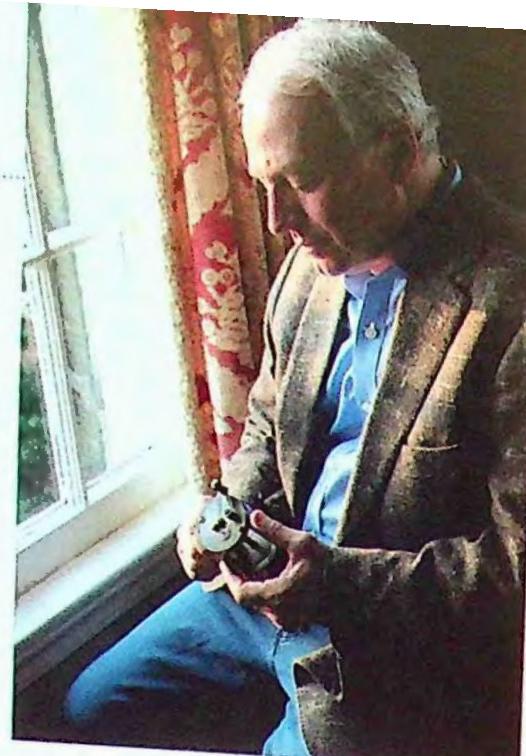
In 1990, William Hinkebein, then a young salesman for a Louisville cocktail ingredient company, visited a friend's newly purchased Kentucky farm. The men rummaged through the barns on the property, and in one of them, Hinkebein found a tackle box. He opened it up. "It was like a wave hit me," he says. Within were some hand-painted lures and reels, all from the 1930s and '40s. "It reminded me of fishing with my grandfather. I could smell the cigar smoke."

The discovery sparked an obsession. As he traveled the South on sales calls, Hinkebein began visiting antique stores and attending estate sales, searching for vintage tackle. On one such trip, he came upon what would become his abiding passion: a Kentucky reel.

The Kentucky reel, made from roughly 1810 to 1948, plays a singular and significant role in the history and growth of the sport of angling. Its multiplying action (with a spool that typically turned four times for every crank) made it, essentially, the first reel that enabled an angler to ably cast bait and retrieve fish. (The reels used in America before its invention were all single-action or simple spools on a tin holder. The English had multipliers, but used them to retrieve line while trolling.) The reels gave rise to the popularity of recreational angling and begot the modern-day bait caster, the most popular reel used in bass fishing today.

But more than that, the reels were works of precision and beauty, handcrafted by a small tribe of artisans—jewelers, watchmakers, gunsmiths—who used brass or silver for the hardy bodies and embellished them with engravings and handles made of ivory or buffalo horn. And like the best bourbons, they were all made in Kentucky, a state replete with fish-filled waterways. They became a gentleman's implement, owned by bourbon magnates such as Albert B. Blanton and George T. Stagg, and presented as gifts to presidents Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, and Theodore Roosevelt.

Because the reels were striking, sturdy, and hand-crafted, collectors clamored for them off the bat. But they became much harder to find after the mass manufacturing of reels began in the 1910s; in the mid-1940s, the last maker closed up shop.



Clockwise from left: William Hinkebein holding a rare circa-1810 Kentucky reel by George Snyder; a reel used to catch tarpon by B. C. Milam of Frankfort, Kentucky; more of Hinkebein's collection. Previous page: A polished German silver reel with an ivory handle by Jacob Hardman, who began making reels in Louisville in 1843.



Hinkebein, who is fifty-nine, has now amassed approximately 150 reels, the world's finest collection, according to Jim Schottenham, a well-regarded fishing museum curator based in Vermont. Among Hinkebein's favorites are three made by George Snyder, a Paris, Kentucky, jeweler and silversmith who invented the Kentucky reel around 1810. As the story goes, Snyder, an avid bass angler, got his hands on an English multiplier and manufactured his own improved version. Besides Hinkebein's trio, only eight other known Snyders exist. A buyer once offered Hinkebein "well over six figures" for one of them. (The reels typically range in price from a couple hundred dollars to tens of thousands.) "It's like gold fever, man," he says. "I know because I've got it myself."

Hinkebein started his pursuit of Kentucky reels by perusing auctions and attending lure collector "meets." He accumulated them slowly, adding one or two a year, and he nearly quit after someone stole five of his favorites from his car. But just a few years later, he spotted those in an auction catalogue. "I retrieved them and was back in the game," he says.

The bulk of his pieces took some guile to procure. A man from Mount Sterling, Kentucky, frequently showed up at meets with Kentucky reels that other collectors didn't even know existed. He "always wore overalls and had a beard like a member of ZZ Top," Hinkebein says. "He was moody, and everyone was afraid of him, but he and I hit it off." He urged the man to keep his collection intact and to keep it in Kentucky. He did both by selling it to Hinkebein.

The allure of the reels for Hinkebein goes beyond fishing. "This is my home state, and settlers came here because of the bounty of game and the rivers that teemed with fish," he says. "These reels represent to me the then-frontier of a budding nation and all of the entrepreneurship, ingenuity, and craftsmanship of that time." They also connect, he says, to the state's other two big industries. "Kentucky's water is high in calcium and magnesium and low in iron. It's the same water that makes horses' bones strong and bourbon taste so good."

Hinkebein says there is one "Holy Grail" Kentucky reel for him out there, made by the nineteenth-century Frankfort gunsmith James L. Sage. He located it only recently, and reached out to the owner to ask if he could photograph it. "The owner called and said he 'wasn't interested in selling' and hung up," Hinkebein says. "But I haven't given up just yet." □





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A screened-in porch at Kiawah River on Johns Island, South Carolina, poised for a soiree.

SOUTHERN STYLE

Porch Party

SET THE STAGE FOR STYLISH
MINGLING OUTDOORS

By Haskell Harris

S

Spring in the South may be the best time of year to gather on the porch, with long afternoons and cool evenings begging for cocktail hours, casual suppers, and chats with friends that last long after the crickets start their song. New looks from makers in the region and beyond will help you refresh your outdoor space and offer a warm welcome to guests.

■ BAR CART

Press the weatherproof aluminum Luxembourg trolley from Fermob into service at the entrance to the porch for easy access to a batch of margaritas or ranch water (\$1,392; fermobusa.com).

■ TUMBLERS

The artisanal look of these tumblers from Fortessa in Virginia disguises the fact that they're shatterproof—perfect for the outdoors (\$45 for a set of six; food52.com).

■ LANTERNS

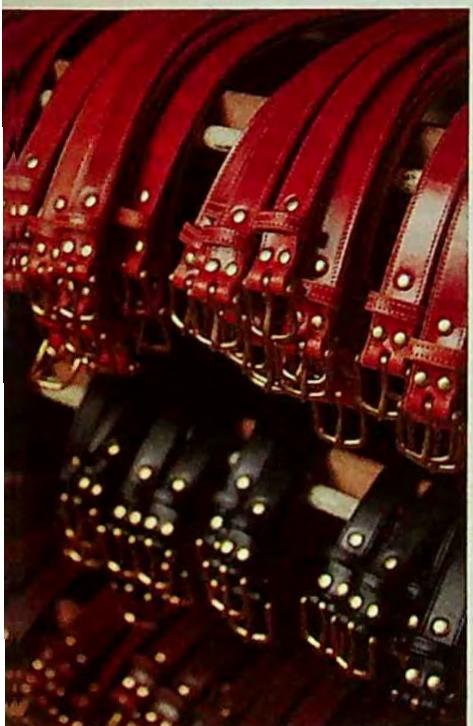
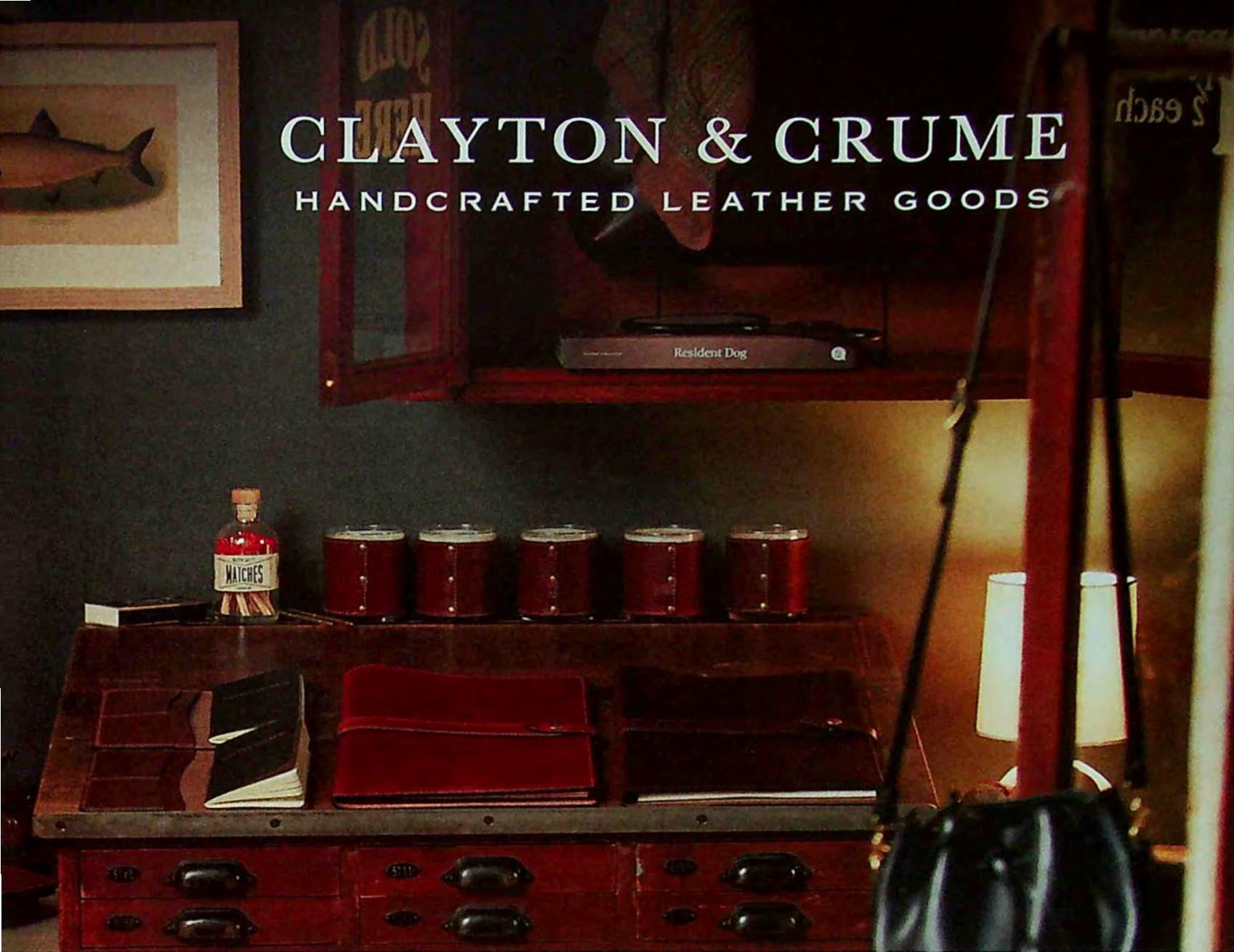
Allsop's ten-inch nylon lanterns run on rechargeable batteries powered by the sun and can be hung up or set on the deck for a cozy glow (\$90 for three; food52.com).

■ PLANTER

A weathered glaze lends this terra-cotta planter from Currey & Company the look of an artifact plucked from a centuries-old Italian garden, ready for potting (\$550; mitchellhillinc.com).

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■ SOFA AND CHAIRS

The Kyoto Alu collection by JANUS et Cie feels equal parts modern and traditional, thanks to clever weather-proof aluminum frames that mimic the organic lines of rattan (\$4,725-\$12,313; janusetcie.com).

■ PILLOWS AND RUG

Add natural panache to a covered porch with pillows that echo the greening of spring trees (\$136 each) and a woven rug (\$1,298), all by Annie Selke (annieselke.com).

■ TABLE

This round iron and concrete cocktail table by Currey & Company pays homage to antique French faux bois garden furniture (\$1,840; mitchellhillinc.com).

■ LAMP

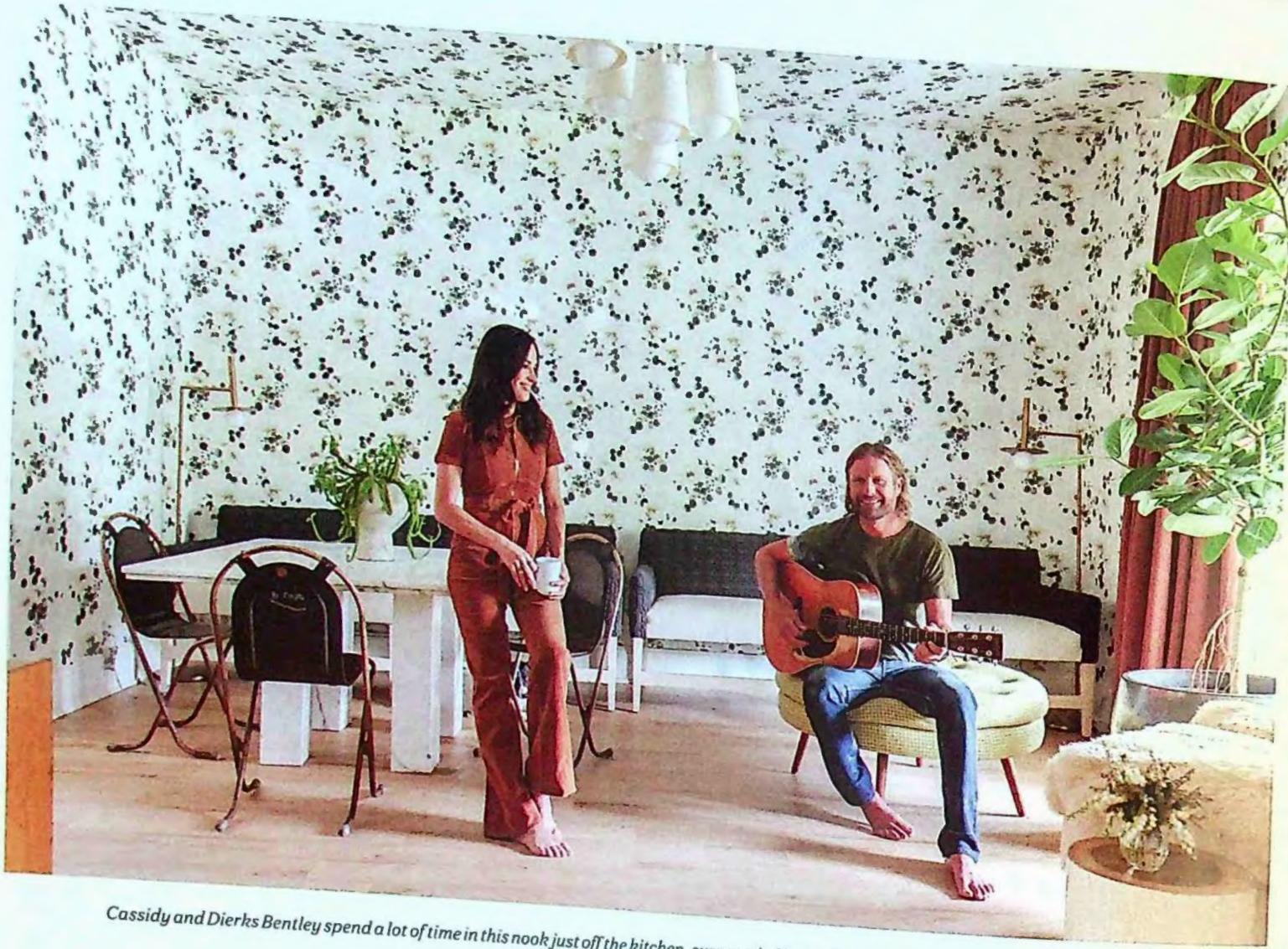
Handsome outdoor lamps that can withstand the elements can be hard to find, but Alabama's Summer Classics offers plenty of options, including this teak floor design with a Sunbrella shade (\$2,362; summerclassics.com).

■ SIDE TABLE

There's no job this little garden stool from Burke Decor can't do: offer an extra seat, hold cocktails, serve as a plant stand, you name it (\$636; burkedecor.com).

■ THROW

When evening comes around, stave off the chill with an easy-to-wash linen throw by Hawkins New York (\$175; food52.com). □



Cassidy and Dierks Bentley spend a lot of time in this nook just off the kitchen, surrounded by wallpaper by watercolor artist Kelly Ventura.

HOMEPLACE

Sound and Color

COUNTRY SUPERSTAR DIERKS BENTLEY AND FAMILY PUT DOWN
ROOTS IN A BRIGHT NASHVILLE BUNGALOW

By Jennifer Justus

When Dierks Bentley gives a tour of his home, nestled in a lively central Nashville neighborhood, he's happy to talk about wallpaper. He'll tell stories about paint colors and chime in with his wife, Cassidy, about fabric and artwork. But you get a sense it's the outside he can't wait to show off—the front porch of their Craftsman looking out on the bustling street, and the passel of bikes, skateboards, and walking shoes that keep his family on the move.

"Cass found the house, and we just went for it," Bentley says. "It's been awesome in a lot of different ways: Kids running in and out. I can ride my bike. I can look out the window and see a bar, a coffee shop, and restaurants. We have great people all around us, and it's made me love the city in a way I've never loved it before."

Sure, working musicians are tucked into every corner of Nashville, but the heart of town isn't necessarily a locale you would expect for a big-time country star with three CMA Awards, fourteen Grammy nominations, and an impressive portfolio of ten studio al-

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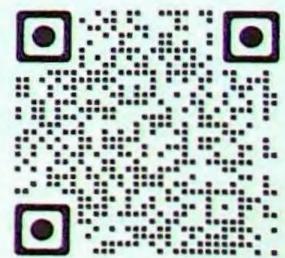


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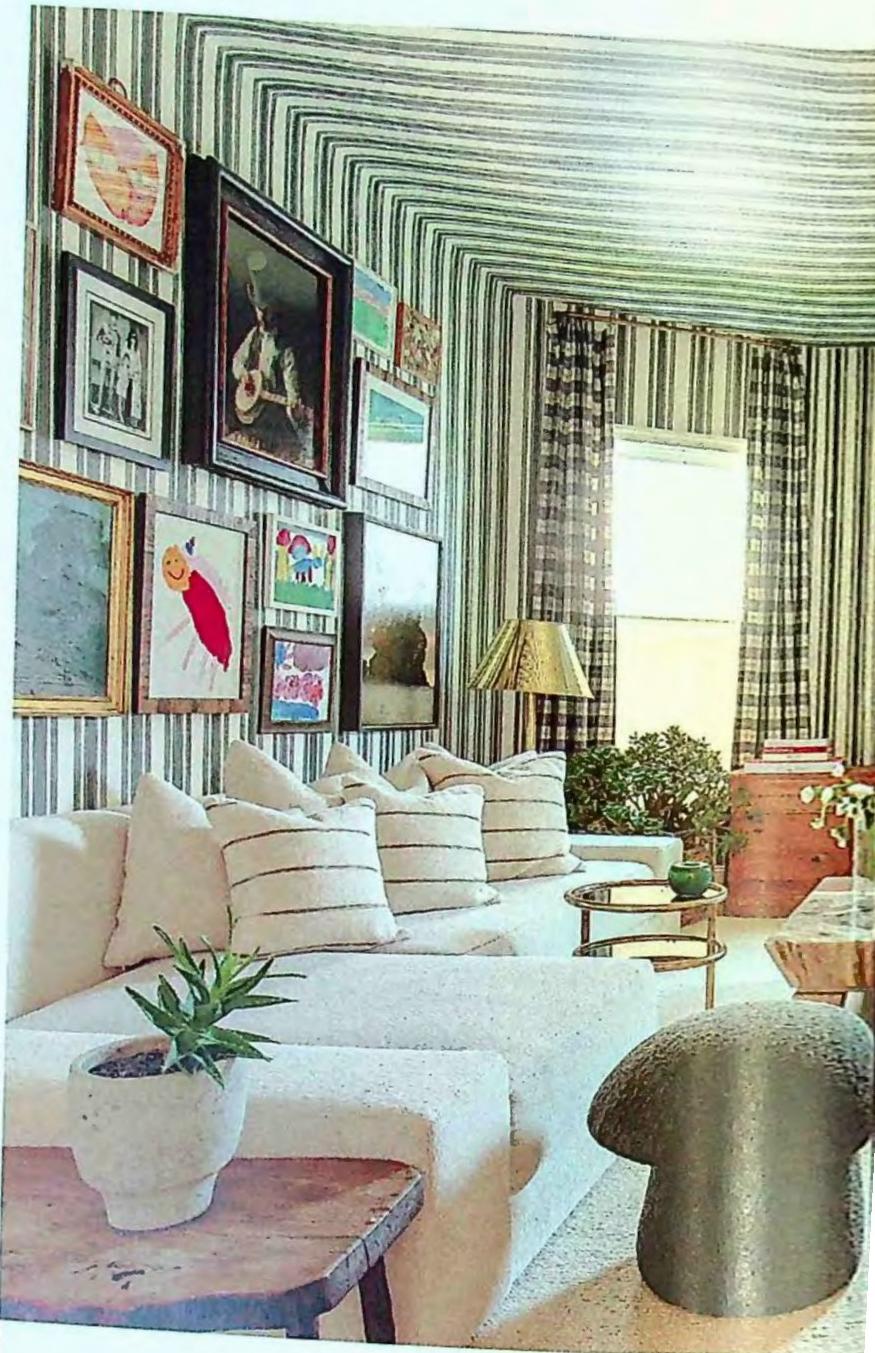
Clockwise from below: A guest bedroom; the family room doubles as an eclectic art gallery; a powder room;

the mudroom; the kitchen's minimalism contrasts with the color and patterns in the rest of the house.

bums, including his recently released *Gravel & Gold*. As buses drive picture-taking tourists past sprawling celebrity estates in the suburbs (the Bentleys have been through all that), you won't find a looming gate or a winding drive with a big lawn or pool here. "This house is smaller than the last house we lived in, and that's one of the things we love about it," Bentley says. "We like being close to our kids—and apparently, close to our neighbors."

During the height of the pandemic, the Bentleys sheltered in a cozy, 1,200-square-foot house in Telluride, Colorado, with their three kids and two dogs. To everyone's delight, it worked, and they realized they might benefit from downsizing. Designer Lindsay Rhodes, a longtime friend and collaborator, visited the family there to plan their new Nashville space, meeting on the porch—as you do in a pandemic—to sift through tiles and samples in a wild array of patterns and colors. When the Bentleys lived in their old house, "the kids were younger," Rhodes says. "As your kids grow, your life and what you need change. They're family people, and they want the house to reflect them and have meaning behind it."

They found what they were looking for in the circa-1910 cottage with ten-foot ceilings, delicate molding, big, bright windows, and a central hallway that bisects and connects the whole house, initially intended to cir-



culate airflow in the pre-air-conditioner days. "There's a lot of personality," Cassidy says.

One of her favorite spots is a central nook just off the kitchen. There, enveloped by watercolor-dappled wallpaper, the couple drinks coffee and chats while the kids do homework. Adjacent to it, in the contrastingly minimalist kitchen, Harry Styles, Frank Sinatra, Dua Lipa, or George Jones might serenade dinner prep. ("Bluegrass and country music are always in the air somewhere," Bentley says.)

In the nearby family room, stripes on the walls and



ceiling provide a backdrop for a gallery of eclectically framed artwork, where a moody still life, a painting of Bill Monroe, and black-and-white family photos hang alongside kindergarten self-portraits and other home-made masterpieces salvaged from backpacks. A cream sofa and rug and a pink-marbled coffee table anchor the space in reality.

Baby pink walls in the more formal living room get punctuated with bold leopard prints, mustard-colored accents, amaretto drapes, and a massive flower-laden painting by the New Orleans artist Ashley Longshore.





From top: The living room; the Bentleys in the central hallway with their two dogs, Emmy (left) and Bear.



To an onlooker, the femininity of the space might contradict the Dierks Bentley they think they know—the long-haired cowboy dressed in boots and black leather who often calls fans onstage to shotgun beers with him—but here, he's rather comfortable on a blue velvet couch, awash in the blush glow. “I call it the Arizona room—it has that sunset hue,” Bentley says, noting the state from which he and Cassidy both hail. “You walk in the house, and it’s a little reminder of home.”

Though his career began in the early 2000s, Bentley never thought much about creating a home in Nashville, until Cassidy moved to town when the two were getting married in 2005. “I had been living on a friend’s couch, and I had a houseboat I was kind of living on, too,” he says. “The bus was home for a long time. This is the first home that felt like *home* to me, honestly.”

As with all aspects of Bentley’s life, the best way to understand the place is to listen to it, taking in the way the floor creaks as children run across it and the chatter of neighbors strolling by on the street. “The house is kind of like music,” he says, “where you have to hear it to share what it is that makes it special.” □

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BY DAVE SIMONETT

An Unlikely Bird Dog

A FULL-TIME MUSICIAN WITH A YEARNING TO HUNT FINDS AN UNUSUAL CANINE COLLABORATOR



ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN CUNEON

H

is name was Zephyr back then. He was about a year old and close to seventy pounds, with a brown, black, and brindle coat that told the story of a wild and varied genetic background (most likely the offspring of at least one Australian shepherd). The woman at the foster home said he came from a shelter in Missouri after living on the street. He was a tender loving fool, and my two kids and I were smitten immediately. We went home to await the judgment of the foster group.

It had been many years since I'd had a dog in my house. I'd done the math a hundred different ways, but as a touring musician, I couldn't quite get to a solution that didn't rely on the kindness of friends and the expenses of kennels. But as I remember a writer once quipping, there was a hole in my life the size and shape of a "medium-sized brown dog," and in the end I decided to fall back on an old tactic of mine in these kinds of situations: Just do the thing and figure out the particulars later.

After a week of consideration that felt much longer, we got the green light. My kids and I went to pick up the beautiful mutt on the way out of town to visit Grandma. On the drive, I told them I didn't think Zephyr was the right name. He was starting a brand-new life, after all. I grew up a Minnesota Twins fan in the eighties and nineties. I'll spare you the back-and-forth, but we ended up naming him Hrbek, after the gregarious first baseman Kent Hrbek, my favorite player on those classic teams. Shortly after we arrived at Grandma's, Hrbek found the cleanest corner of carpet in the entire house and promptly defiled it. Welcome back to dog ownership, I thought.

Back at our home in South Minneapolis, Hrbek/Zephyr became fully Hrbek, and as luck would have it, I had the good fortune to meet Bob St. Pierre, the cohost of a local outdoors radio show. I did not grow up hunting, but I did grow up in the outdoors, fishing and camping with my family, and I loved listening to the hosts extol the wonders of chasing pheasant and walleye, of gravel roads and early mornings. One morning my band's name, Trampled by Turtles, came up on the air. Flattered, I reached out just to say thanks, beginning a conversation that brought Bob and his

GOOD DOG

cohost, Billy Hildebrand, to one of our concerts. As we hung out backstage, Bob asked me if I would be interested in going on a pheasant hunt with him, and after I'd completed my hunter safety course in various backstage rooms around the country, we went on that hunt. I felt intimidated, excited, and dumb, but also welcomed and, in the end, amazed. A new world opened to me. But it was missing something, namely a bird dog.

My partner, her daughter, and their dog eventually moved in with my kids and me. It is a loving home, if not a spacious one. With bird hunting beginning to occupy more space in my mind and house alike, I again faced a math problem I couldn't solve: I wanted a bird dog, but there was simply no room for a third pup. Then one Saturday morning I was listening to Billy and Bob on the radio while they were chatting with a well-known hunting dog trainer, Tom Dokken. I don't know if my particular situation had anything to do with it, but Billy posed the question of whether it would be possible to train a mixed-breed dog to hunt. Tom demurred a little, landing on what I heard as "maybe." He also said he didn't want everyone who owned a mutt to start calling him about it.

I immediately picked up the phone and called him about it. I got the kennel's head trainer, Mike Wieben, who gave about the same answer: "Maybe?" We decided to give it a shot.

Almost as soon as Hrbek began his bird and gun training, getting him used to the sounds and smells of the hunt, I got a call from an apprehensive Mike. "Since you left, Hrbek has lost all interest in retrieving anything," he said. "I can't get him to focus, and I'm sorry to say I don't think it's meant to be." I was disappointed, but I didn't hold it against either man or beast. Hrbek would continue to be a great friend, and someday I would get a "proper" bird dog. As I was walking to my truck to pick him up early the next morning, Mike called again. "I don't know what happened," he began. "This morning Hrbek started retrieving like a dog possessed. Let's give him some more time and see if it sticks." I was overjoyed, and so proud.

Hrbek's two weeks of training over, I headed down to pick him up. When I got there, Mike asked me to hide behind a spruce tree on a hillside so I could get a view

WITH BIRD HUNTING BEGINNING TO OCCUPY MORE SPACE IN MY MIND AND HOUSE ALIKE, I AGAIN FACED A MATH PROBLEM I COULDN'T SOLVE: I WANTED A BIRD DOG, BUT THERE WAS SIMPLY NO ROOM FOR A THIRD PUP

of the Hrbek show without distracting the pupil. I watched him execute a pretty decent retrieve, dropping a training pigeon at Mike's feet, and I almost cried. I don't think any of us really thought it would happen. For a pound puppy with no kennel lineage, retrieving a bird seemed like a huge accomplishment. I felt like he was doing it for me.

That October, Bob invited me and Hrbek to a bird hunting camp in northern Wisconsin. We were after grouse and woodcock in an impressive expanse of young poplar and birch forest. I had gotten home from tour late the night before, drained from weeks on the road. Touring in a band is a life I love, but the long hours, crowds, noise, and substantial amounts of social interaction left me very much looking forward to a walk in the woods. When we arrived, Hrbek was visibly excited by all the people and dogs, and I was not overly confident he would be flushing or retrieving anything—a notion proved true when a woodcock flushed on its own shortly into our first walk. I shot it, and my hopeful heart sank as Hrbek simply circled around the other people and dogs in the party like, well, a shepherd. I finally coaxed him into finding a bird I had already found just so he could get some feathers in his mouth.

With the daylight waning, I decided to take Hrbek and go off on our own, heading down an old logging road. The trees looked a little older than prime grouse woods, but I was enjoying the walk on that beautiful autumn evening. Then Hrbek got birdy. It was the first time I could tell he knew for certain a bird was close by, and he soon flushed a grouse. I raised my gun late and missed an easy shot, but I could see where the grouse landed. We stalked over, slowing down as we drew near. Hrbek again went into ac-

tion, his big shepherd body running an olfactory slalom course in front of me, nose to the earth, clearing leaves and brush in near ecstasy. Sure enough, a second flush. It never gets old. This time I was more prepared. I brought down the bird, and Hrbek ran to where it fell and picked it up gently. With some fervent calling on my part, he brought it over to me and somewhat reluctantly gave it up.

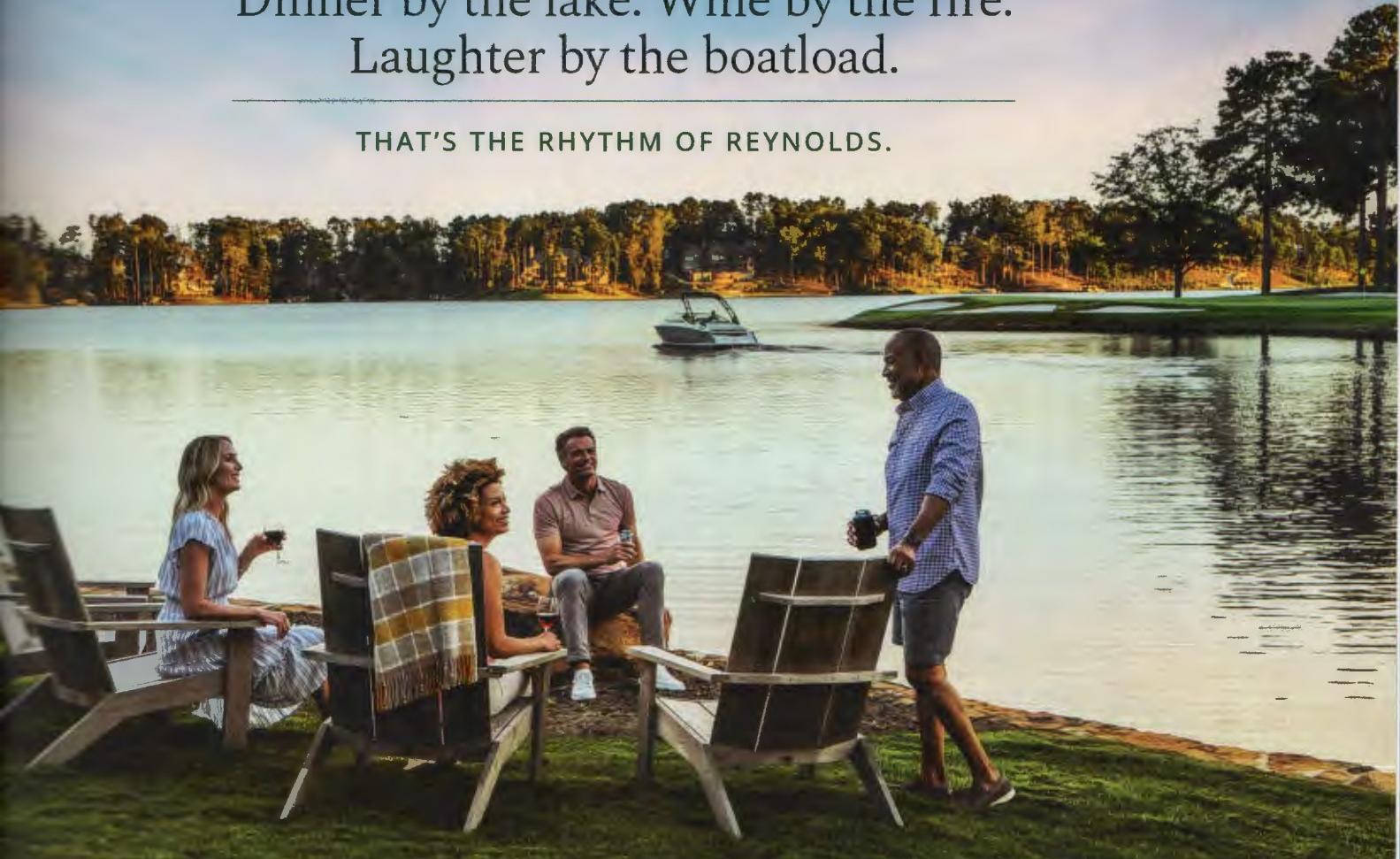
Coaxing aside, he had flushed and retrieved his first bird. He was now, officially, a bird dog. I flipped him over on his back and scratched his belly. The remaining daylight fading fast, we rushed back to share the news.

Hrbek and I both came to this life later than most and upon an unusual path. Neither of us are purebred hunters. But against those odds, we have become real partners in the field. Since that first foray, Hrbek has flushed and retrieved many birds, with just me and on hunts with friends. Now when he sees the shotgun and the vest go into the truck, he runs in circles and squeaks like a drunken field mouse.

He still bumps or misses a bird now and again, and I still miss my share of shots. But we have both almost gotten the hang of hunting upland birds. We often look at the map together, imagining new places and new birds. I recently met a writer in South Carolina who has invited us there to look for quail, and I can't wait to see if we can find them as well. As with any dog in our lives, I know there will never be enough time with Hrbek, whom my daughter Lucy calls the "secret hunting dog." Our time together will no doubt run out before either of us is ready, so I treasure every hunt with him for the unlikely and incredible event it truly is. ■

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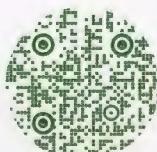


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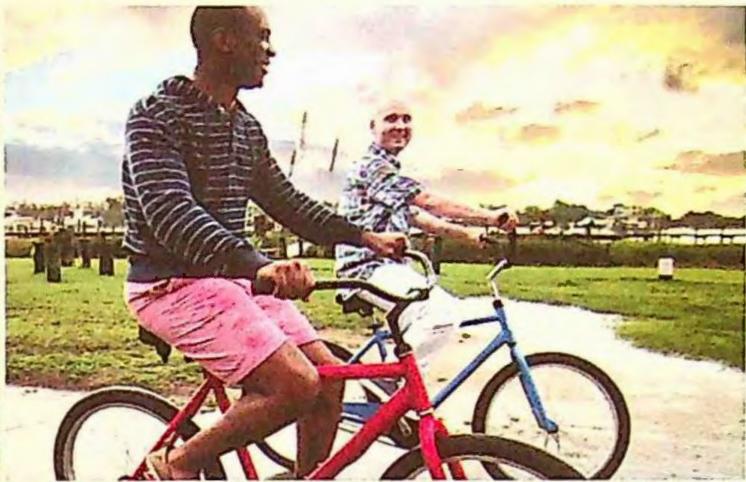


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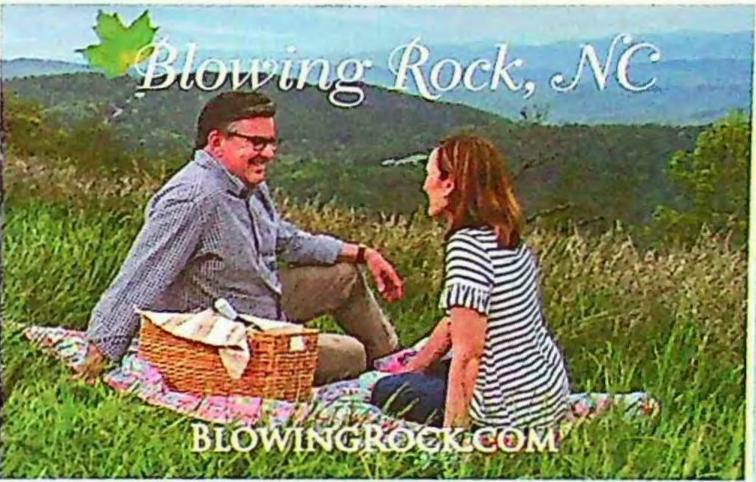

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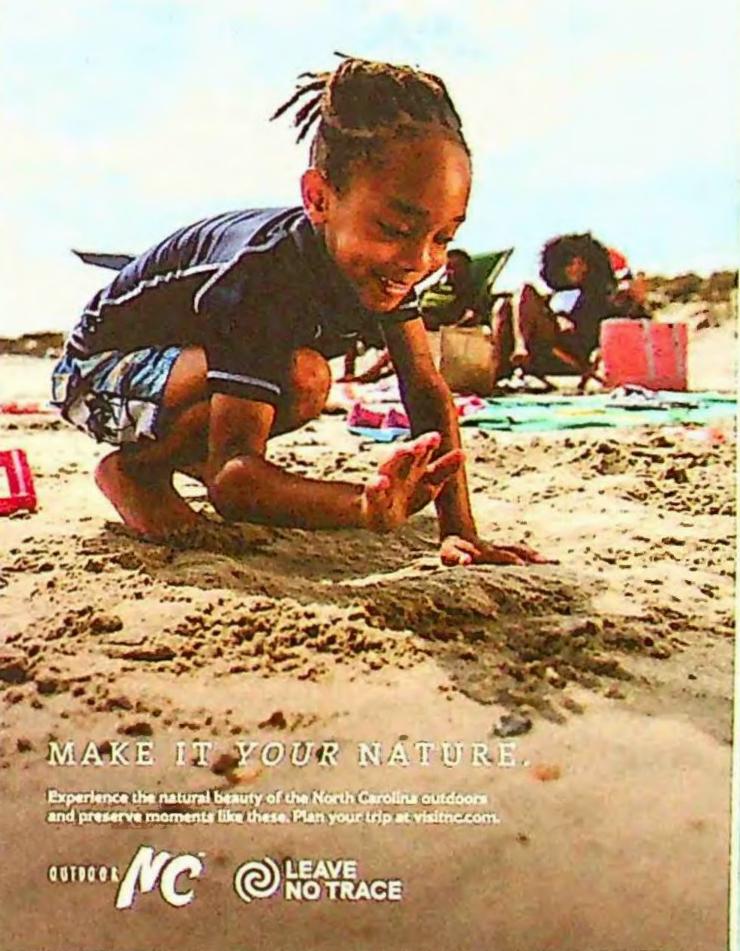


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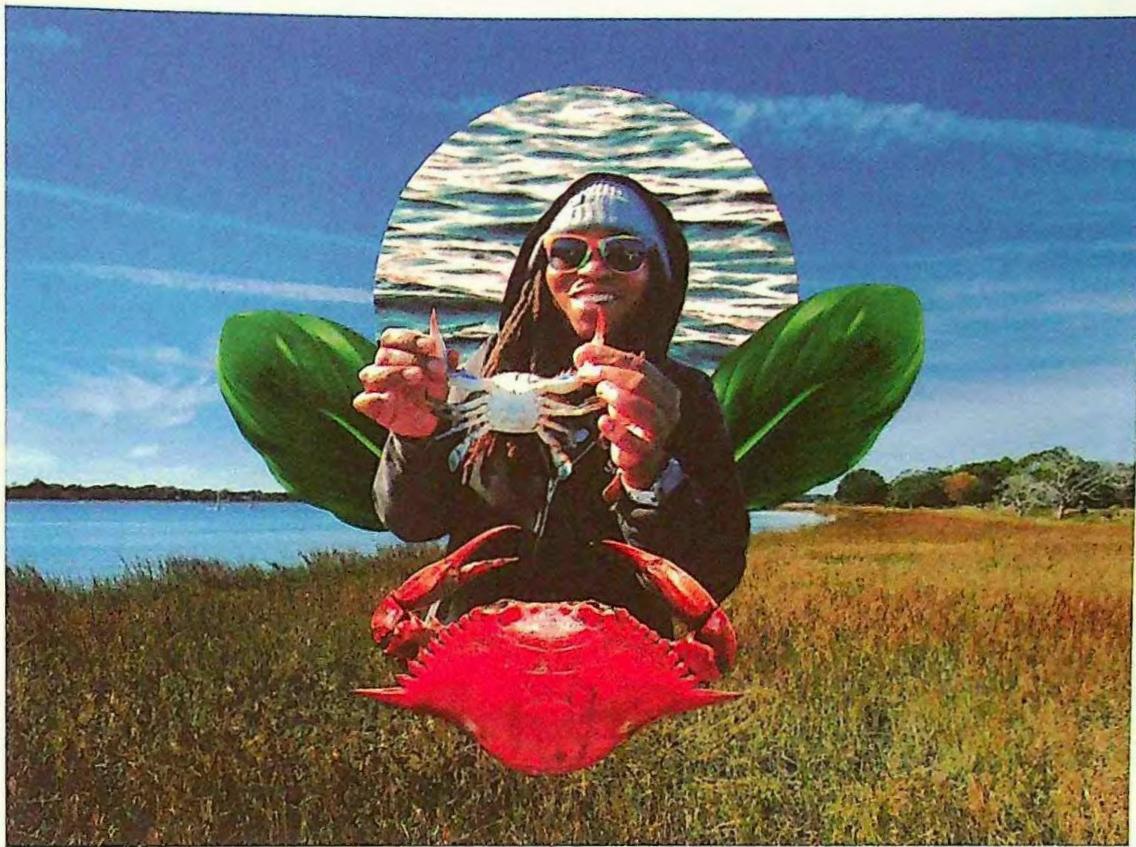
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BY LATRIA GRAHAM

Casting Call

DECLAWING A FEAR OF CRABS LEADS TO A LESSON IN SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD

Aconfession: I have lived in the coastal state of South Carolina most of my life but harbor a deep aversion to seafood.

As an Upstate dweller, I rarely ran across shellfish and other marine life. My parents constantly worked to make ends meet, so vacations to the beach were unheard-of. I saw the ocean for the first time at age eleven; I would not make my way back to the water's edge again until I was seventeen, and then not for a decade later.

My seafood avoidance wasn't about taste, though, but fear. As the daughter of a farmer and avid fisherman, I have no issue coming face-to-face with my intended dinner. The mantra of catch, clean, and cook might as well be tattooed on my forehead. But my family's tall tales kept me from indulging in the delicacy the rest of them

salivated for: *Callinectes sapidus*, which translates to "beautiful savory swimmer," otherwise known as the Atlantic blue crab.

Those myths circulated during gatherings at my great-aunt Gladys's house in Columbia. Gladys, a firm, deeply religious woman, cherished family, and our arrival triggered celebrations with dishes of jubilee, including, occasionally, fresh seafood. I still recall the round wooden crates arriving from the coast, stuffed with ice and living crabs feisty enough to climb out and face off with the adults, front claws tilted toward the ceiling. From the safety of my play area, I peered toward the stove and the speckled blue stockpot emitting steam, where soon the hostile crabs would find themselves in hot water. To keep children like me away from the crustaceans, the adults told us a tale about a shriveled gray section of the crab they called "dead man's fingers." The "fingers," they said, were

poisonous; they would strike us dead if we got a taste. It wasn't hard to believe; to my seven-year-old self, those crab parts looked just like the shriveled fingers of the corpse who hosted the HBO series *Tales from the Crypt*.

Now I understand that my family fibbed to make sure the children left the crabs to them. This winter, I decided thirty years of intimidation was enough—it was time to better understand the pastime that fed my ancestors and enchants my coastal friends. That's how I find myself on the end of a dock along the Ashley River for an early morning meeting with Tia Clark, who runs Casual Crabbing with Tia in Charleston.

Clark grew up on the peninsula, but logically, the area's beaches felt a world away, and she only began crabbing as an adult as a way to get some exercise and to escape the pressures of her career in the hospitality industry. Then she loved it so much she quit her job, and for the past five years, she has spent every waking moment on the water, teaching others how to crab and better understand the briny depths.

I tell her of my folktale-based fears and my anxieties about being pinched—I'm a writer, after all, and I'd prefer to keep all my fingers. So she first shows me how to handle a crab properly, fingers on the carapace, well behind the claws. We then start with an old crabbing technique called "necking." All it takes is a ball of twine, a tasty morsel tied to the end of the line (in this case, a piece of chicken), time for a crab to discover your offering after you sink it into the water, and a net to scoop up your target. When I feel a tug, Clark instructs me to slowly bring up the line, the wet twine scraping against the tops of my shoes. Crabbing this way is an exercise in patience, a challenge for someone whose motto is "Instant gratification takes too long." I don't mind being bad at it; I'm just thrilled to be out there with Tia and Art Perry, who cohosts the outings, standing on the edge of the dock, watching the tide ebb and flow.

After that, I try my hand at throwing a cast net but don't catch much of anything: a palm-sized silver perch, a small shrimp,

an empty shell or two. No matter, I am entranced—by the rhythm of being in conversation with the water, by the elegance of the casting movement. The physical poetry of raised arms, the sweep of white that spreads just before the arc, and at the end, the satisfying slap as the net settles into the water and sinks.

When we finish, I have a half bushel of blue crabs for my trouble. Clark demonstrates how to clean them, and I take the bunch to Charleston Crab House, where they will steam your catch, for a price. I try my first cooked crab while staring out at Wappoo Creek. The crab meat is flaky, salty, sweet. But the amount of labor involved, even with the aid of a cocktail fork, and my lack of dexterity mean I can't crack enough to satiate myself, and the whole exercise leaves me frustrated. I have the privilege of ordering something else from the restaurant menu. My ancestors didn't.

TIME ON THE WATER SAVED TIA CLARK'S LIFE. SHE WANTS TO MAKE SURE GENERATIONS TO COME CAN FISH AND FIND RENEWAL AT THE WATER'S EDGE, TOO

In fact, they're why I pushed myself to go crabbing: before moving to the interior of South Carolina, my forebears were enslaved along the coast. Back then catching the abundant blue crabs helped them survive. These days, crab numbers tell a different story. Once considered a sustainable, renewable, accessible food source, crabs are now buckling under environmental and human pressures such as large storms, warming waters, habitat loss, irregular weather patterns, pollution, and overharvesting. The sociological, ecological, and economic role blue crabs play on the coast is now in jeopardy. In recent years, Southern fisheries have reported drops

in populations of more than 20 percent; North Carolina, for instance, has instituted new measures to boost sustainability, including limits on seasons, catch sizes, and bycatch.

Out on the dock with Clark, out of breath, back tight, I better understand the fulfillment that trying to catch, clean, and cook my dinner brings. Clark deeply believes in the power of those efforts too, but she adds one more c: conserve. Time on the water, she says, saved her life. She wants to make sure generations to come can fish and find renewal at the water's edge, too. If we're go-

ing to take from the environment, we also need to contribute to its survival.

A couple of days later, I join Clark to see how she translates that ethos into action. She, her work crew, and a group of volunteers have gathered to build shoreline restoration cages with South Carolina Oyster Recycling and Enhancement (SCORE). SCORE collects oyster shells from Charleston restaurants, and at least once a month, Clark's group comes to a site on James Island to fill cages, sometimes repurposed from old crab traps, with the shells and coconut fiber to create a viable habitat for oyster larvae and other sea life.

The program plants the artificial reefs in estuaries where coastal erosion threatens the marine environment, including along the pier where Clark takes people crabbing. She's seen the difference the method makes, even on land. The grass, which once retreated toward the road, has returned, and while crabbers wait for their tutorial to begin, they can watch fish and other aquatic animals search around the cages for prey. The water above the pluff mud, once cloudy, now looks clear thanks to the constantly filtering oysters. Hooded mergansers dive between the cages, searching for a snack before reemerging, their white crests sparkling in the sun.

"In April, when we put these here, it was just a basic cage," Clark explains to the group. "Now there are oysters in there—you can see them popping out of the cages. To me that is amazing, because we put them here with our own two hands."

I look down at her hands, then back at mine. I had told an artist friend, Jonathan Green, about my frustration as I struggled to open my steamed crabs—the pride in the hard work, but my unwillingness to savor something my ancestors were grateful for, even treasured. Then he introduced me to a new definition of an old word: *penance*. A lifelong Southern Baptist, I was unfamiliar with the four types of penance Catholics can perform to satisfy sin. One variation includes accepting "daily crosses," or hurdles, with patience.

Perhaps my time building these cages is my version of coming full circle—of grappling with my family's past while crafting some sort of solution to environmental problems. The joy is in the cast of the net, the penance in all the other parts. I saw what my hands struggled with, but also understood the power they held. ☐

The Secrets of the Southern Seaboard

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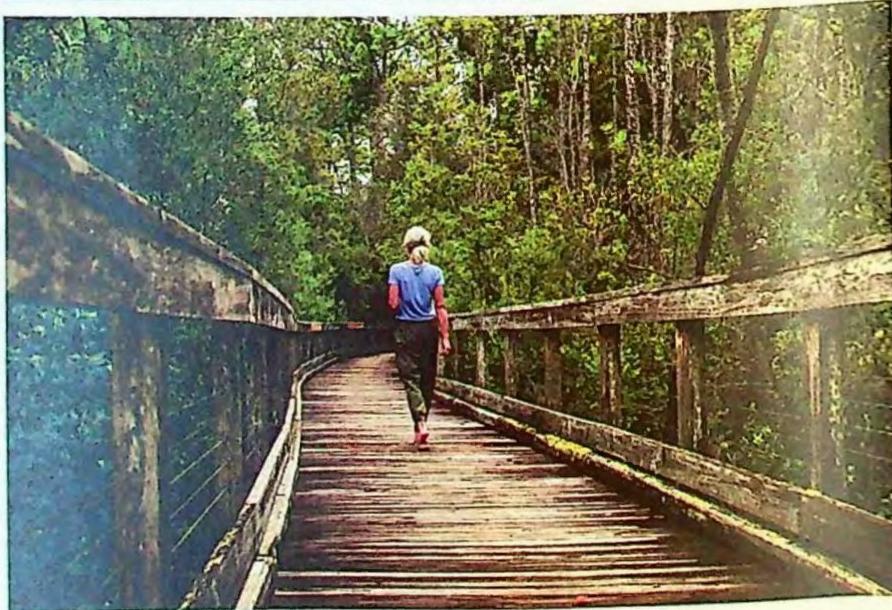
Gulf to Table

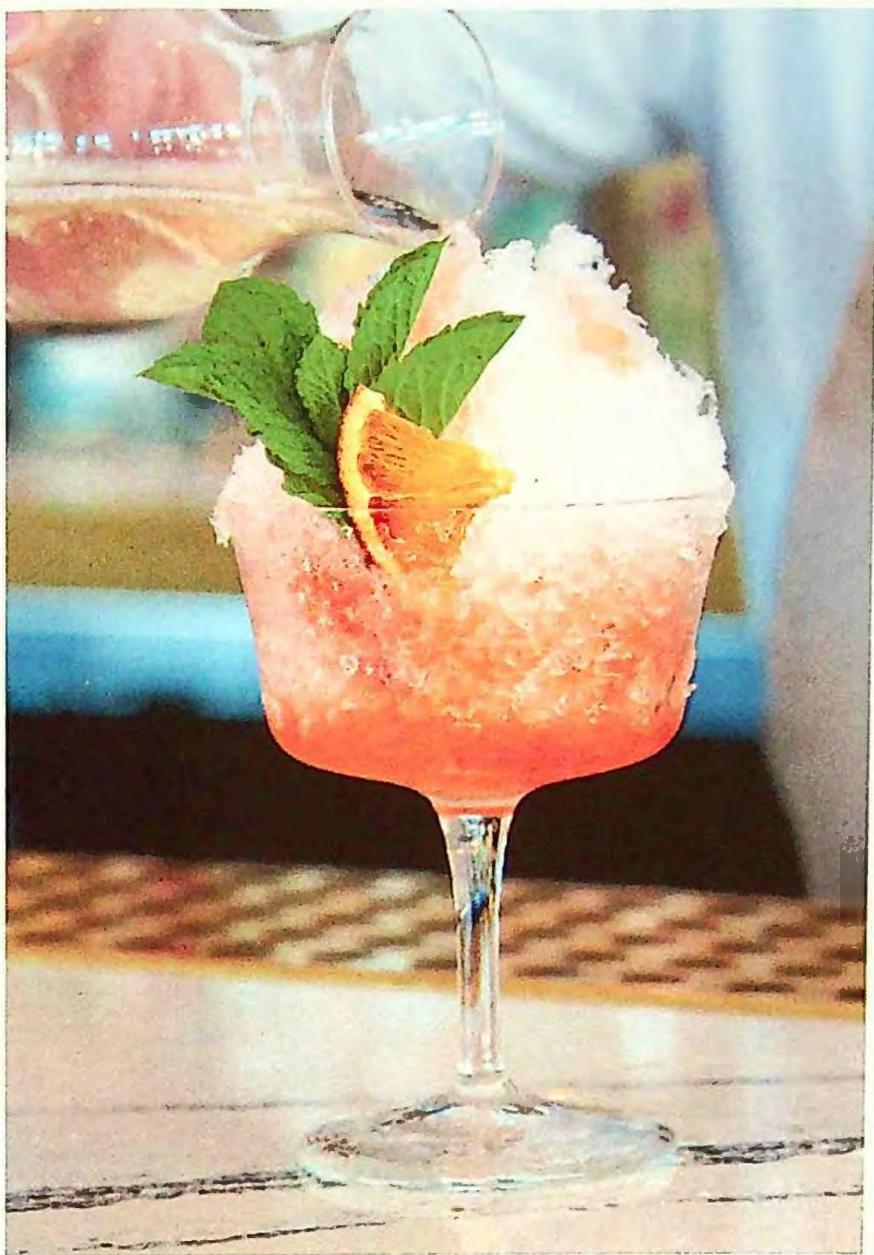
SOUTH WALTON, FLORIDA, DOES DESTINATION DINING JUST RIGHT

Say the name South Walton and those familiar with Florida will almost certainly mention its sixteen beachside neighborhoods. Each with its own distinctive style and personality, the communities make the uncommonly beautiful Gulf Coast region and its sugar-white shores a fashionable getaway offering water activities, colorful boutiques, and a thriving arts and culture scene. Beyond South Walton's easily accessible surf—just thirty-five miles from Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport and Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport—is another buzzy industry epicures can't ignore. South Walton is home to a two-hundred-restaurant-strong culinary scene filled with award-winning chefs, waterfront dining, and locally sourced ingredients.

Given the proximity to fresh seafood, the hardest dining decision in South Walton is whether or not to exercise restraint, no easy task when presented with plates of Apalachicola Bay oysters at Shunk Gulley Oyster Bar or Stinky's Fish Camp. Or how about roasted Spanish octopus at Roux 30A? Or a fried lobster tail from Café Thirty-A? Suffice it to say, choosing a dessert could present a problem. Or shall we say an opportunity? The chefs who've moved to the region certainly seem to think so.

It's only natural that so many culinary elites have made South Walton home. Its appeal extends far beyond the tide. Vast nature preserves provide a relaxed atmosphere where experiencing the outdoors is easy thanks to two hundred miles of hiking and biking trails, four state parks, fifteen rare coastal dune lakes, and a fifteen-thousand-acre state forest. More than 40 percent of South Walton's land is preserved, which protects the untouched natural beauty. And the fine views and fine dining go hand in hand. Visitors can run, bike, or walk the Timpoochee Trail, a nineteen-mile coastal path that offers panoramic views and various restaurants along the way. Hit the brakes at mile five, and you'll be rewarded with Blue Mountain Beach's tall dunes and organic cinnamon rolls from Blue Mountain Bakery. Pull over at mile fif-





Clockwise from far left: A Gulf view from Fish Out of Water restaurant; a Passionfruit Smash from The Citizen; Rosemary Beach; Alys Beach Nature Trail.

teen for a last chance to grab a photo of a dune lake, a unique geological feature found in only a few places in the world, before cruising to the finish line and parking at Shades Bar & Grill, a 30A dining destination for three decades and the perfect spot to toast your outdoor adventure.

Prefer that the buffet come to you? Not a problem. In South Walton, customized beach picnics can be arranged with all the best bites catered by one of the area's professional charcuterie companies, Fresco Picnic Co. Or opt for a breakfast board packed with sweet and savory treats from Blue Magnolia, a father-daughter catering team. Private culinary experiences can easily be arranged and enjoyed in any environment, beach or beyond. Thanks to chefs like Dan Vargo of Fine Coastal Cuisine, you can have a five-star-restaurant experience without leaving your beach rental.

Of course, one of the best ways to taste South Walton's rich food scene is in a convivial atmosphere, and you won't find one better than at South Walton Beaches Wine & Food Festival. The April event invites oenophiles to descend on Grand Boulevard at Sandestin to sip more than six hundred wines. Pace yourself over the four days of pours with visits to the Nosh Pavilions for delicious small bites.

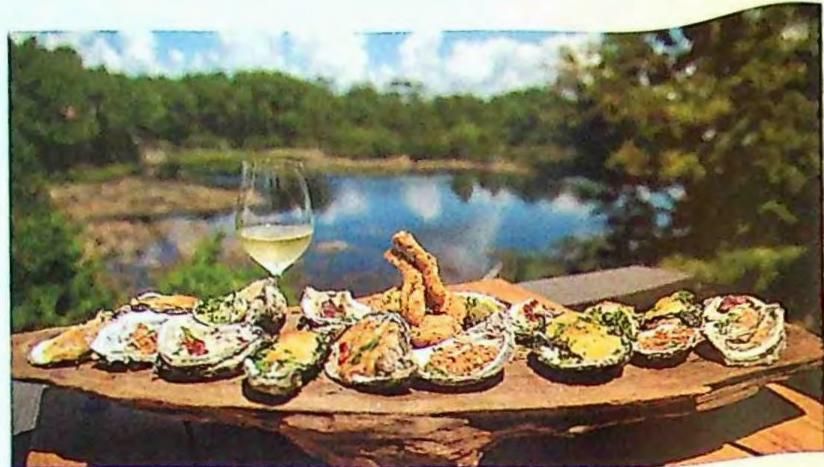
If that doesn't sate your appetite, there's always the Watersound Town Center Farmers Market. Thanks to South Walton's temperate climate, the Wednesday and Saturday event is held year-round. It allows visitors to source their local produce while sampling the area's best food truck fare. Live music and a variety of artisan crafts add to the fun of the outdoor affair.

What makes dining so special in this Gulf Coast playground is that the provenance of every dish is all around, from the fresh catch caught just miles off the coast to the local farm stands delivering artisan breads, cheeses, and preserves. And every meal is best enjoyed outside along South Walton's twenty-six miles of coastline. There's only one option for an authentic South Walton farewell: a beach bonfire. Simply secure a permit through the South Walton Fire District, then settle in under a bright starry sky. Or let one of a handful of professionals do the heavy lifting for you by contacting companies such as Bonfire Guy, La Dolce Vita, or 30A Blaze. These vendors will handle all the legalities, not to mention setup and cleanup of chairs, blankets, drinks, and the obligatory s'mores. All you need to do is show up ready to relax.

And that's the ultimate attitude of this epicure-friendly destination where natural beauty extends from the plage to the plate.

Learn more at VisitSouthWalton.com

SOUTH WALTON



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Life's a Beach

**IN ST. PETE/CLEARWATER, FLORIDA,
FUN IN THE SUN NEVER ENDS**

For words: zero inches of snow. That's the promise of St. Pete/Clearwater, the most popular travel destination on the American Gulf Coast. When people in northern regions of the nation are still buttoning up their parkas and lacing their brogans, the St. Pete/Clearwater area is soaking up the sun. It's nearly guaranteed. A balmy climate allows St. Pete/Clearwater an average year-round temperature of eighty-one degrees. If that's not reason enough to start packing for this Tampa Bay jewel, well, consider that under its stunning skyline, St. Pete/Clearwater promises a world-class arts scene, acclaimed fine dining, professional sports, great shopping, and emerald-green waters along beaches recognized as some of the best in the country.

Ready to shrug off your sweater and head south? If you're eager to feel the sun's glow but need another excuse to book a flight beyond your seasonal affective disorder, consider that St. Pete/Clearwater holds a thousand special events each year, more than enough excuses to set your email "Out of Office" message.

In April, Clearwater Beach celebrates its coastal riches with the Pier 60 Sugar Sand Festival. The seventeen-day event is considered one of the best sand sculpture festivals in the world and showcases architectural masterpieces made from one thousand tons of sand. In October, the art moves from the beach to the buildings during the SHINE



St. Petersburg Mural fest. The internationally recognized street art festival brings in the best muralists from around the globe and invites them to turn walls into canvases by bringing art outdoors to the public.

An emphasis on artistic expression is a signature of this Gulf-side expanse. One need only enter the Dalí Museum, which houses the most extensive collection of the famed surrealist's work outside of Spain, for confirmation. It's one of thirty museums in the area. St. Pete/Clearwater is also home to the Museum of the American Arts & Crafts Movement, a five-story space in downtown St. Pete that showcases the work of luminaries including Frank Lloyd Wright and Margaret Patterson.

A spirit of inclusiveness extends beyond St. Pete/Clearwater's arts scene to its community. One of the most diverse regions in the nation, this part of Gulf Coast Florida is known for its welcoming and accepting atmosphere. Visitors can see this firsthand during St. Pete Pride, the Southeast's largest pride parade and festival. The multiday celebration hosted in June takes place in venues across the greater St. Pete/Clearwater region.

After drag bingo, there's more to explore along this white-sand coastline. As the golf capital, Florida has more than its share of great courses. Plenty of public, semi private, and resort courses offer engaging layouts with fabulous fairways, manicured greens, and, of course, challenging water and sand hazards.

That midday tee time can work up a thirst. Fortunately, St. Pete/Clearwater isn't called the Gulp Coast for nothing. Made up of fifty locally owned breweries, it's a trail you won't exhaust quickly. And for a perfect pairing? Fresh Gulf Coast seafood, of course. Take your pick of waterfront dining, then savor the sea's best with shrimp, grouper sandwiches, or king crab legs—dishes typically relegated to summer, served fresh year-round.

In this sunny region, the spoils of summer never end, be it on the plate, on the beach, or on St. Pete/Clearwater's ever busy social calendar. Pack your bags and dive in.

From top: Paddleboarding at sunset; the Imagine Museum showcases contemporary glass art from around the world.



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at VisitStPeteClearwater.com*

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ST.PETE
CLEARWATER
FLORIDA





Hang Ten

*WHETHER YOU'RE CRAVING GREAT SURF OR SURF AND TURF,
NEWSMYRNA BEACH, FLORIDA, HAS IT ALL*

For curious travelers in search of adventure, New Smyrna Beach offers a world of wonder. Amid the charming small beach town sits one of North America's most biologically diverse estuaries. The Indian River Lagoon Park, with its mangrove wetlands, is home to four hundred species of birds, dolphins, manatees, and turtles. Given the region's ecological marvels, it's no wonder visitors find New Smyrna Beach just as appealing.

For those who never miss an opportunity to explore, New Smyrna Beach is teeming with roads less traveled. The area is peppered with blue and green trails, whether it's hiking, biking, kayaking, or stand-up paddleboarding you're after. And accessibility for all is ensured. Smyrna Dunes Park features a wide, elevated, wheelchair-adapted boardwalk that meanders over two miles just south of Ponce Inlet. It's also home to New Smyrna Beach Inlet, considered one of the most consistent surf breaks on the entire East Coast. No surprise to surfers—*Surfer* magazine has declared the city one of the "Best Surf Towns in America." Bring your board to ride the waves, whether you're a beginner or an expert.

More surf and turf appreciator than surfer? Not to worry. In this coastal Eden, great food is as plentiful as the many species that call the region home. In fact, New Smyrna Beach's culinary scene is entirely independently owned, with not one chain to be found. Not surprisingly, the independent spirit extends to the plates, a boon for travelers with a taste for variety. Dine in a tree house at Norwood's built around a live oak tree. Or enjoy the chandelier-lit patio at Third Wave Café & Wine Bar, featuring an eclectic menu with broad appeal. Oenophiles will find a welcome respite in SoNapa Grille, so called for its large selection of Sonoma and Napa wines by the glass and bottle. And don't miss the shrimp and scallop carbonara or Highway 29's famous pork chop.

Scout out more surprises beyond the culinary scene by visiting Turtle Mound. This prehistoric archaeo-

logical site is located in the Canaveral National Seashore. Archeologists believe Indigenous people of the Timucuan tribe built these turtle-shell-shaped mounds of oyster shells, some as high as fifty feet tall. From here, take in the exceptional Atlantic Ocean and Mosquito Lagoon Aquatic Preserve views from observation platforms along an elevated boardwalk.

Founded in 1768, New Smyrna Beach has seventeen miles of sandy white beaches to make the most of. Visitors are not only treated to the best of coastal living, but have the bonus of enjoying it in the second oldest city in Florida.

The area's deep roots are reflected in its vivid arts and culture. Named one of the "100 Best Small Art Towns in America" by the non-profit Americans for the Arts, New Smyrna Beach proudly displays its title with a wide variety of impressive museums, art galleries, historical sites, and theaters. To appreciate all it has to offer creatively, guests should take the NSB Arts Trail. The map leads visitors to sites like the Atlantic Center for the Arts, an arts education facility that hosts artists in residence and offers master classes and studio space to New Smyrna Beach's sizable artistic community. In route are a series of galleries, including Arts on Douglas and the Hub on Canal, which acts as an incubator to more than seventy artists showcasing their work, offering public impromptu artist talks, classes, and workshops. Perhaps the best way to see what New Smyrna Beach offers is on its monthly Flagler Avenue Wine Walks, during which visitors can stroll from venue to venue on the historic street and sample various wines. The town's pedestrian-friendly layout makes enjoying the community by foot the best means of transport.

While the natural beauty of New Smyrna Beach could easily steal a visitor's attention, the vibrant surrounding community adds intrigue everywhere you look, indoors or out. There's something here for every traveler, whether you prefer to pack a surfboard or a paint palette. Scenic and surprising, New Smyrna Beach isn't your average beach town.

Immerse yourself at VisitNSBFL.com

A family takes in the New Smyrna Beach views; a surfer catches a wave; a family bikes along a New Smyrna Beach path.



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NEW
SMYRNA
BEACH
FLORIDA



Past Perfect

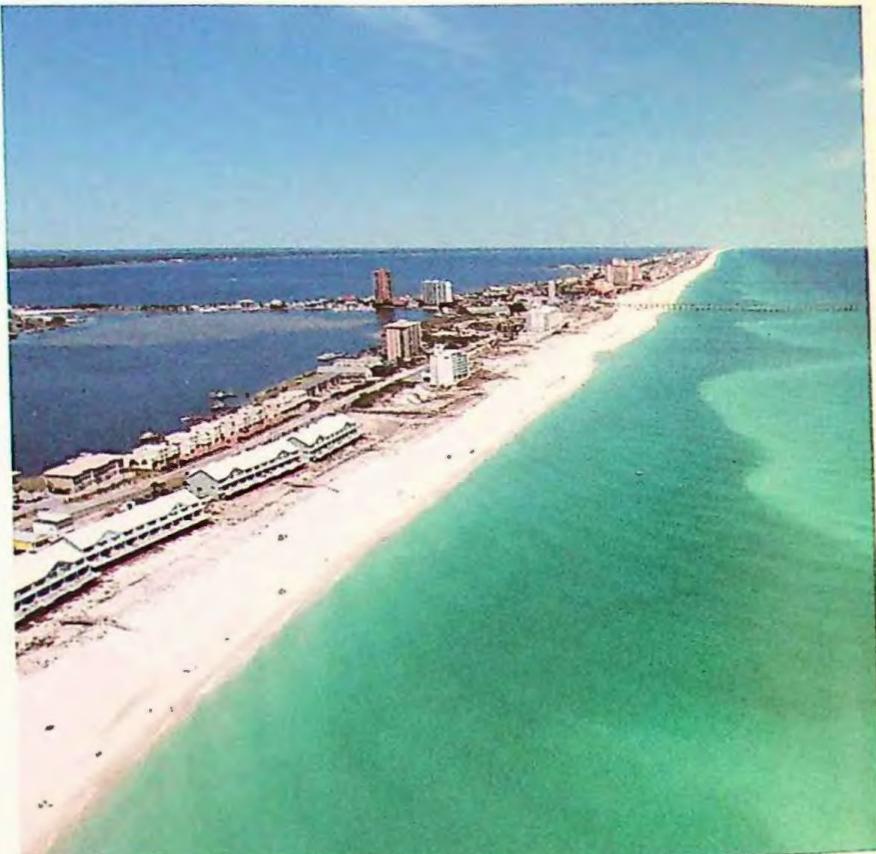
TIME TRAVEL FOUR HUNDRED YEARS IN PENSACOLA, FLORIDA

Forty-eight years before the British arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, Pensacola became America's first settlement in 1559. It was here in 1821, at the Plaza Ferdinand VII, where the formal transfer of Florida from Spain to the United States took place. Though often overlooked in the telling of American colonial history, Pensacola has been central to the founding of this nation. Its location made it a hotly disputed space; it changed hands seventeen times in its more than four hundred years of written history. Before that, it was home to Indigenous tribes for some ten thousand years. It has operated under five different flags, served as a strategic military defense, and functioned as a vital port. Today it's a Gulf Coast gem of a city with a past as rich and enticing as its vibrant arts-and-culture-filled present. And with pleasant year-round weather and a crystal coastline, it's worth a visit no matter what period you wish to explore—yesterday or today.

Called a beach destination with an old soul, Pensacola is a place where the heliolatrous can fulfill their vitamin D quota while other party members indulge their love of live arts. For the former, Pensacola is the picture postcard ideal of Florida. Just look at the Pensacola Beach Pier that juts into the Gulf, inviting anglers and sun-lovers to make the most of the beachfront and perhaps even spot a Blue Angel flyover in the process. Or, stroll the Pensacola Boardwalk, a sun-kissed epicenter of shopping, dining, and entertainment (dolphin cruise, anyone?), located right on the water.

And for live performance enthusiasts, consider that Pensacola has the happy distinction of being home to five professional performing arts organizations: Pensacola Opera, Ballet Pensacola, Pensacola Children's Chorus, Broadway in Pensacola, and Pensacola Symphony Orchestra. All perform on the stage at the historic Saenger Theatre, a stunning Spanish Baroque building and former vaudeville playhouse constructed in 1925.

Palafox Street is the main artery of historic downtown and is filled with cozy wine bars, quaint restaurants, art galleries, and boutiques, and English influences. There are plenty of opportunities to enjoy fresh Gulf seafood, from beach bars to fine restaurants. It's also a great



place to appreciate the city's history. Sites, including Historic Pensacola Village, the exhibit *Voices of Pensacola*, and the Pensacola Museum at the University of West Florida, walk visitors through the last four centuries in this remarkable city. For an education on Pensacola's African American roots, head to the Belmont-DeVilliers district. A neighborhood steeped in music, it was at one time a hotbed of jazz, ragtime, and blues artists who did shows at places like Abe's 506 Club. Louis Armstrong, James Brown, Ray Charles, B.B. King, and Aretha Franklin all performed there.

Today you can see equally stirring performances at Pensacola's many festivals, including JazzFest in April and Foo Foo Fest—a twelve-day celebration of creative happenings—in November. A collection of local and touring acts such as Chicago's Second City improv troupe, banjo virtuoso Béla Fleck, and Jazz for Justice have all taken the stage.

After learning so much about this diverse and ever-changing region, you may think that the far end of the Florida Panhandle is otherworldly. But, the Spanish moss and hospitality remind you that Pensacola identifies as the American South today. And that makes it even more appealing. Here you can enjoy museum hopping and oyster slurping, or relax and soak up the sunshine, basking in the sound of the Gulf and taking in the beauty of miles of unspoiled surf. Nowhere else can you experience so much on your way to the beach.



Plan your trip at VisitPensacola.com

From top: Pensacola coastline; a JazzFest trumpet performance.

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From left: The Pearl Hotel's Havana Beach Lounge; pan-roasted chicken from the Havana Beach Bar & Grill.



State of Serenity

SOUTH WALTON'S PEARL HOTEL
INVITES YOU TO LOSE YOURSELF
TO TRANQUILITY

At The Pearl Hotel, you'd be forgiven for thinking you were in the West Indies. With its whitewash trim and black-and-white-striped awnings, the Emerald Coast resort in South Walton, Florida, has the look and feel of a dreamy inn somewhere along the Caribbean Sea. Instead, this Panhandle paradise is far more conveniently located, less than a day's drive from most locations in the Southeast, a mere forty-nine miles from Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport and just twenty-one miles from Destin-Fort Walton Beach Airport. Better yet? Its amenities were explicitly designed with adults in mind, making it an ideal romantic getaway or serene space for some soul-searching.

Your first taste of tranquility arrives when you enter the hotel's front doors with a cocktail greeting at check-in. Meanwhile, complimentary valet parking service hints at the St. Joe property's commitment to coastal luxury. But these perks are far from the end of The Pearl's attention to detail. Here every element of a guest's comfort has been carefully considered. Step onto your balcony, an architectural space all fifty-five newly reimagined rooms have, and you'll be rewarded with private views of the Gulf of Mexico or the quaint seaside town of South Walton. Once you're

settled in, the five-star hospitality continues outside your guest room door.

Every Pearl hotel guest has access to an array of private resort amenities available through Watersound Club offerings, which includes an exclusive beach club that is just a fifteen-minute drive away and invites guests to cool off in two 7,000-square-foot pools as they take in Gulf Coast breezes. To the east and west of the hotel, guests have their pick of Shark's Tooth or Camp Creek Golf Course, depending on their mood. The Pearl offers guests complimentary bikes for cruising from place to place as well as daily beach setups for those who'd rather just soak in the sun, sand, and surf. You can take a dip at the on-site adults-only pool or head to the sand. But leave your collapsible beach wagons at home. Here the hard work of finding an ideal spot in the sun is done for you. The Pearl's staff will take care of all the prep, including beach chairs and oversize umbrella assembly on the hotel's private beach just steps from the hotel's rooms or suites.

Any number of activities can make up an afternoon at this waterfront oasis. Guests can find a moment of zen surfside or choose a poolside spa service courtesy of Spa Pearl. Opt outside with a visit to nearby West Kingston Road to experience an elaborate butterfly garden or access kayak and canoe rentals at the WaterColor BoatHouse.

When the sun sets, take the cobblestone path into The Pearl's AAA Four-Diamond restaurant, Havana Beach Bar & Grill. Its old-world design evoking vintage Havana and its charming rooftop is what memorable vacations are made of, especially when the cocktail hour coincides with sunset. There's no prettier panorama to toast at the end of the day.

At The Pearl Hotel, you have permission to relax. How you choose to do so is entirely up to you.

To learn more about The Pearl Hotel's special offers and packages, visit ThePearlRB.com



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IN DAYTONA BEACH, FLORIDA

Cheerleading aficionados recognize it for its beachside Daytona Beach Bandshell. Race-car enthusiasts for its high-speed 2.5-mile NASCAR track. And baseball devotees for its Jackie Robinson Ballpark, where the eponymous hero played professional baseball's first racially integrated game. It's Daytona Beach, a Florida wonderland where twenty-three miles of Atlantic shoreline have wooed visitors since its founding in 1870.

Daytona Beach enjoys warm temperatures all year long. Whether you visit in March or mid-July, you can take full advantage of the wide, flat beach perfect for strolling or biking. However, cycling need not be limited to the shore. Daytona Beach features more than seventy miles of trails. At nearby Tomoka State Park, visitors can also kayak or canoe along the Tomoka River while keeping an eye out for over 170 species of local and migratory birds.



A couple kayaks on the Tomoka River.

It goes without saying that anglers will find themselves spoiled for choice in Daytona Beach: They can fish from shore, in the flats, or in the depths of the Atlantic. If your idea of landing a big one is more about nabbing a great dinner reservation, you're in luck. Seafood steals the spotlight here with no limit to its interpretations: steamed crab legs, oysters Rockefeller, seared swordfish. Savor the briny bounty at any number of restaurants. Daytona Beach, known as the Festival Capital of Florida, also offers a variety of food festivals including the Wine & Chocolate Walk, the Summer Mermaids Craft & Food Fest, and the St. Demetrios Greek Festival. Daytona Beach doesn't even need a reason to celebrate, nor should you.

Plan your Daytona Beach vacation at DaytonaBeach.com

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BEACH ON

Daytona Beach offers fabulous fishing, delicious local cuisine served all around town, and accommodations ranging from quaint bungalows to upscale resorts—all benefitting from the sound of live music drifting through the salty air night after night. Plan your trip at DaytonaBeach.com.

DAYTONA BEACH.

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BY VIVIAN HOWARD

Say the Magic Words

THE ABRACADABRA OF TELLING YOUR AMBITIONS TO THE WORLD

When I resolve to do something, I say it out loud.

Not out loud in my shower or in earnest for the mirror, but out loud, boldly to another person, often multiple people on separate occasions. It's an uncontrollable tic of mine that has served me extremely well in some circumstances and shamed me painfully in others.

There have been big successes, like when I told my sous-chef while expediting a Friday night service that I was going to make a documentary series about the food and farmers of Eastern North Carolina, and our very own restaurant and his work

would probably be part of it. I had just dreamed up the idea the night before while standing in the very same spot. At the time, I had no media presence, no disposable income, no experience doing anything in front of the camera or behind, and I knew exactly one person who had ever made anything other than a home video.

Still, I went home that night and promptly gave the news to my twins' nanny. The following morning, I laid it all out for my parents and as soon as possible warned my sisters that if they wanted to shed ten pounds before being on TV, they should get started.

My sous avoided a direct response to this declaration by hiding behind a giant bowl of flying fried collards he was tossing with salt.

The nanny said she hoped the series would result in some travel, and my family agreed I had always been full of ideas. Nobody laughed in my face or asked if anything was wrong. Nobody started a diet that day either. But I hoped I had planted enough seeds that someone would eventually follow up with some questions. Accountability is a powerful motivator when you hate to disappoint people.

On New Year's Eve 2021, in lieu of a kiss at midnight, I made the first resolution I had ever intended to keep. Twenty twenty-two would be the year I would write an op-ed intended for and poignant enough for the *New York Times*. Ever since I'd moved to New York in my early twenties, the idea of writing for the newspaper had skulked. Even after I made my way back to North Carolina to put down roots, the ambition stuck with me, with no little thanks to the chip on my shoulder: I never wanted to be a Southern writer with a Southern opinion, I wanted to be a *good* writer with a *worthy* opinion, and I decided somewhere along the way that being published in the *NYT* would validate me.

I was alone that New Year's, so the next day, I called my then ten-year-olds and promised them that within a year, their mom would have her own words printed in our nation's paper of record. Opinionless months later, I was stunned when Flo, our family's squeaky wheel, asked me out of the blue how the "piece was coming for the *Times*."

Flush with maternal shame, I wanted to know how she knew to call it a "piece for the *Times*." Flo said there was no way not to. She heard me blabbing on the phone about the thing I wanted to write but hadn't yet all the time. I asked Flo to stay in her lane. She failed to, and although I missed my deadline by a few weeks, I did write an opinion "piece for the *Times*" this past January on the restaurant industry's struggles.

Not all of my "say it to slay it" plans, however, have worked. Too many times I've tried my hand (um, mouth) at talking into practice things that my gut didn't want to do at all.

When *A Chef's Life* took off on PBS and I got the gift of writing my first cookbook, I ran as fast as I ever had—and oddly, without the usual fatigue—away from the Chef & the Farmer's daily, insatiable grind. In the sprint while I was toiling on memory-rooted essays and testing recipes, I felt



excited to work. But what crept into my car when I drove past the restaurant or what slid out of my pillow when I woke up in the middle of the night was guilt—guilt for abandoning the family of people I had cooked, cried, cursed, danced, and laughed with for almost six years. So what did I do? I dropped in for a company-wide pre-shift meeting. I stood behind the bar, my old pulpit where I had preached the gospel of new dishes, and I promised those people I would come back. I would cook, mentor, and make things the way they used to be. I thought that giving my word, saying it out loud, would have the impact it did before. I would do the thing.

Turns out, saying it out loud only works when you *want* to do what you say.

Most often, though, it's the little to medium stuff I proclaim into existence—sometimes. When my children were younger and I would rattle off a list of activities, errands, and household chores we would collectively complete on any given weekend, Theo and Flo used to moan that I was the fire extinguisher of downtime, a weekend dictator who vacuumed up all the fun. What they didn't know then that they most definitely do now is that my diatribe of duties is as much a means of convincing myself of the things we will do as it is to prepare my children—a self-imposed challenge to take my own word that occasionally evolves into "the mom who cried wolf." Now instead of moaning, the twins just roll their eyes. They know that no matter what I say, unless I have scheduled and

already paid for an endeavor, we average 0.75 activities per weekend day.

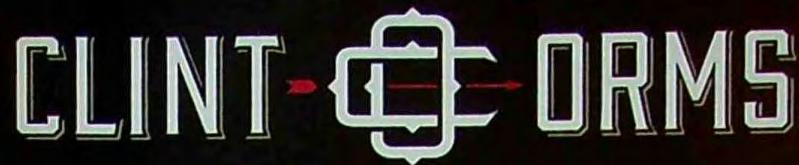
My tendency to give my word when what I'm *really* giving is my hope has gotten me into enough predicaments that I have recently been trying to break the habit. In order to attempt to fix my twitch, I have taken a closer look at the reasoning behind my madness. And, I'm sorry to say, I must once again blame my parents.

First off, they practically force-fed me a TV diet of *Dallas* and *The Young and the Restless* as a child. I knew that even when a character's plan was half-baked, if Victor Newman said he was going to take down every Abbott but Ashley, or if J. R. Ewing stated plain the fate of Sue Ellen, Bobby, or Pam, it was as good as done. (And it wasn't lost on me that only men got to make the big statements while women were made out to be the sneaky ones.)

But perhaps even more powerful than my parents' shared worship of 1980s TV dramas was my mother's insistence on and belief in prayer. Specifically, the act of praying out loud stamped an imprint on her agnostic daughter I can't shake. Mom taught me to ask God for the things I needed and if necessary to ask other people to ask God for the things I needed. To hear her and the congregation of Bethel Baptist tell it, collective prayer—everybody praying for the same thing—got God's attention and made him focus.

Between J. R., Victor, and God, my parents got me good. I'll most likely keep saying my way. ☐

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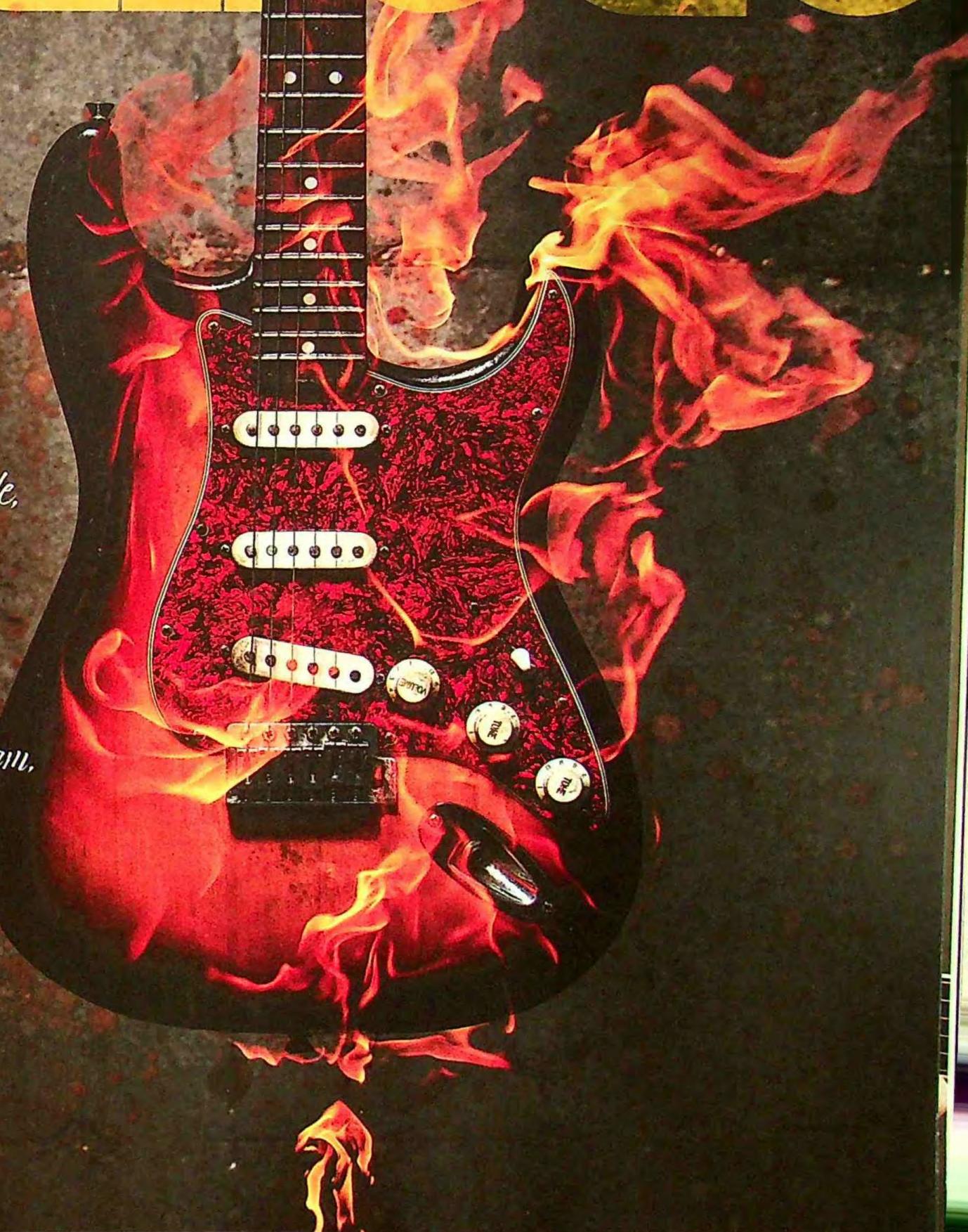
The time is now.

The South's Hottest Guitar

HOT DOGS

Special Music Issue
FEATURING:

Jason Isbell,
Cedric Burnside,
Molly Tuttle,
John Osborne,
Larkin Poe,
Christone
"Kingfish" Ingram,
and More



In January 2019, Jason Isbell got a call from Christie Carter, the owner of Carter Vintage Guitars, Nashville's premier way station for collectible instruments. The shop had just gotten some new arrivals, and Carter wondered if Isbell might want to take a look. He went in the next day. He first played a 1973 Fender Stratocaster that Ed King—one-third of Lynyrd Skynyrd's three-pronged guitar attack—used to write the lick on "Sweet Home Alabama." Then he picked up a 1959 Gibson Les Paul that King had nicknamed Red Eye, a guitar with such notoriety that it was once stolen from him at gunpoint (then returned to him more than ten years later). Gibson had done a few collaborations with King, so Isbell wondered if the Red Eye was the real deal. It was. Skynyrd's early seventies records—(*Pronounced Lēh-nérd 'Skin-nérd*) and *Second Helping*—are seminal albums for Isbell. When he was eight years old, growing up outside of Muscle Shoals, Alabama, his uncle taught him to play the band's classic "Simple Man" on an Electra MPC Les Paul copy. His uncle eventually gave him the guitar—which Isbell still has—and he played constantly, often even sleeping with it in bed next to him.

After leaving the store, Isbell called his business manager to see if he could afford it. No, he was told firmly. Then he called his longtime manager Traci Thomas and said he would do anything to buy it. Thomas talked to the business manager herself, called Isbell back, and said, "They could make it work." It was his, for a price in the mid-six figures. To help pay the tab, Isbell played some gigs that he maybe wouldn't have normally done. "I played a lot of parties, acoustic shows where Amanda came with me," he says with a laugh. "On our anniversary, we played a private show for Viacom in Jackson Hole. It was weird shit like that." It was worth it. Isbell says it's the best-sounding electric guitar he's ever heard. "It vibrates in a way where you can hear notes you don't actually play," he says. "You can tell that before you plug it in and how it feels against your body and in your hands. That one was *alive*."

Wearing a denim shirt, black jeans, and vintage Adidas (he loves sneakers almost as much as guitars), Isbell is sitting at a table in the renovated barn on the property where he lives with his wife of ten years, Amanda Shires—a singer-songwriter and fiddle player—and their seven-year-old daughter, Mercy. An hour outside of Nashville, the barn is a veritable fun house of activity. There's an art space with large abstract paintings on canvas created by Shires. There's a rowing machine next to dumbbells, a resplendent daybed covered in a black-and-white polka-dot blanket and fluffy pink pillows, gig posters and other memorabilia, and a mini Ms. PAC-MAN machine that Shires takes on her tour bus. "She's really good at it," Isbell says. The walls and ceiling are all painted black, and inside the bathroom is a handwritten note from Shires warning visitors not to "miss their mark" or else leave five dollars in a jar as a cleaning fee. There's one bill in there. "Most likely from my dad," Isbell says with a laugh.

On the west-facing wall sit the giant multicolored displays that Isbell has used as the backdrop for recent tours. There are of course a few guitars hanging on the wall, including a Flying V electric along with others that Isbell considers "new," meaning they were built after 1970. He sometimes films his guitar-geek Instagram videos here in the barn. The Ed King guitar, however, he keeps locked up in a safe back at the house. There are multiple insurance riders on it, including one requiring Isbell to buy the guitar its own seat on airplanes. "I talked to Sharon [Ed King's widow] and told her it wasn't going to end up under glass somewhere," he says. "I think she gave me a discount because she knew it was going to be used and not just looked at."

On the barn's roof stands a metal weather vane with a cast-iron skillet on one end and a swallow laid over an anchor on the other, the

PICKING A LEGACY

SINGER, SONGWRITER—and
ACTOR—JASON ISBELL BRINGS
the HEAT on HIS FORTHCOMING
SEVENTH ALBUM, and CEMENTS HIS
SPOT as the SOUTH'S REIGNING
GUITAR GOD

By Matt Hendrickson
Photographs by Robby Klein



*Jason Isbell, photographed
at the Mockingbird Theater in
Franklin, Tennessee.*

logo of the band. Isbell had it fabricated at a shop in Atlanta. To him, the weather vane symbolizes change, a new direction. *Weathervanes* also happens to be the title of Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit's seventh album (the weather vane itself appears on the cover), and the shift in vibe is palpable. After four albums with Nashville superproducer Dave Cobb, Isbell produced *Weathervanes* himself with one goal in mind: replicate the intensity and soulfulness of the band's live shows. While previous records have leaned into folkier singer-songwriter territory, *Weathervanes*, out in June, is a rock-and-roll explosion. Isbell and the band recorded it at Nashville's Blackbird Studio in two weeks, staying true to their lean-and-mean recording process. Isbell plays the song a few times, the band members—bassist Jimbo Hart, guitarist Sadler Vaden, drummer Chad Gamble, and keyboardist Derry deBorja—figure out their parts, and then he hits record. The goal is two songs per day.

Isbell has long been known for his evocative, conversational lyrics, but anyone who's seen him onstage knows his skills with a six-string rival his artistry with a pen. "Jason is a true triple threat, a world-class singer, songwriter, and guitar player—maybe the most threatening triple threat I've ever met," says Patterson Hood, the front man for Southern rock stalwarts Drive-By Truckers, the band Isbell was a member of from 2001 to 2007. "He and I had an immediate and undeniable chemistry. I played him a song I had just written, and he played along with it as if he'd been playing it for years."

Still, on *Weathervanes* Isbell is happy to share the spotlight with Vaden, who on previous efforts sometimes got lost in the mix. On the new material, Vaden is in lockstep with his bandleader. "We've never done any trade-off lead or harmony guitar on an album," Vaden says, pointing to *Weathervanes'* soaring finale, "Miles," in which Isbell laments a disintegrating relationship between a man and his daughter. The song contains three distinct movements, with Isbell and Vaden building from a Neil Young-esque fuzz to a theatrical hard-rock midsection reminiscent of Queen before dissolving into a slice of Beatles psychedelia. "The disconnect between the way the records sound and the way we sound onstage didn't really bother me," Isbell says. "[But] it's just a nice avenue to explore, as a lot of people are shocked when they see us live."

Lyrical, *Weathervanes* is peak Isbell. There simply isn't a more vivid, efficient songwriter in music today. "Did you ever catch her climbing on the rooftop / higher than a kite, dead of winter in a tank top / I don't wanna fight with you baby, but I won't leave you alone," he sings in "Death Wish," a pained look at a woman suffering from depression as the narrator wonders what—if anything—he can do to help. "Save the World" is perhaps the closest to a pop song Isbell has written to date, except it's about the fear parents feel when they send a child to school in an era of mass shootings. Isbell admits it's been a long process learning to balance the heavy, significant lyrics with the volume and bombast of a rock show without making it feel awkward or self-serving. "I'm homing in on the idea that you can have a lot of fun playing really sad songs," he says. "That's what the blues was. I'm not qualified to make blues music, but I can certainly take that spirit and knowledge and apply it to what I'm doing."

Isbell began sketching out lyrics for *Weathervanes* while staying at an Airbnb in rural Oklahoma. He was there to film Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon*, which is expected to be released later this year. Based on David Grann's best-selling book, it's the true story of the Osage Nation murders in the 1920s and Scorsese's first stab at a Western. It stars Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro, with Isbell playing a significant role (as does his pal Sturgill Simpson, though they don't have any scenes together). The shoot was grueling: eighteen-hour days, wearing heavy clothing in the Oklahoma heat.

"It was one of the most difficult things I have ever done," Isbell

says of his final, violent scene. "The pain was intense. The makeup guy started squirting fake blood directly on my eyeball. Every time they would call action, I'd have to pry my eyelid off my eyeball. I tried to sandbag it a bit during rehearsals, but Marty said, 'You're on pain level ten. You're feeling all of this. Please dial it up.' So I was like, 'Oh, shit. I've got to really scream.'"

Isbell, who loved watching Westerns with his grandfather when he was growing up, had a little prior acting experience, playing bit parts in the television series *Billions* and the *Deadwood* movie, but when touring ground to a halt in 2020 due to the pandemic, he began exploring possible film roles. Scorsese's casting director happened to be a fan, and shortly thereafter, Isbell found himself doing Zoom readings with DiCaprio while Scorsese watched. "Neither of them gave me any feedback," he recalls. "But then Marty starts talking about how he did things on his other films, so I'm thinking I at least have a shot if he's telling me this stuff." Later that afternoon, he offered him the part.

Isbell doubts he'll do something like that again, because it took him away from Shires and Mercy for lengthy stretches of time. But he did pick up a few things from the director that helped him to make *Weathervanes* on his own.

"What I saw through Marty is that if you have the right people in the room, you don't have to micromanage," he says. "But if something needs to be done, you should do it yourself. One day, I saw him get out of his chair, walk over, and fix a man's jacket in the middle of our shot. It's ninety-five degrees and everyone's wearing tweed, and he just walks across the field and comes over and grabs the man's jacket, pulls it and pats it down and then goes back and sits down at his monitor."

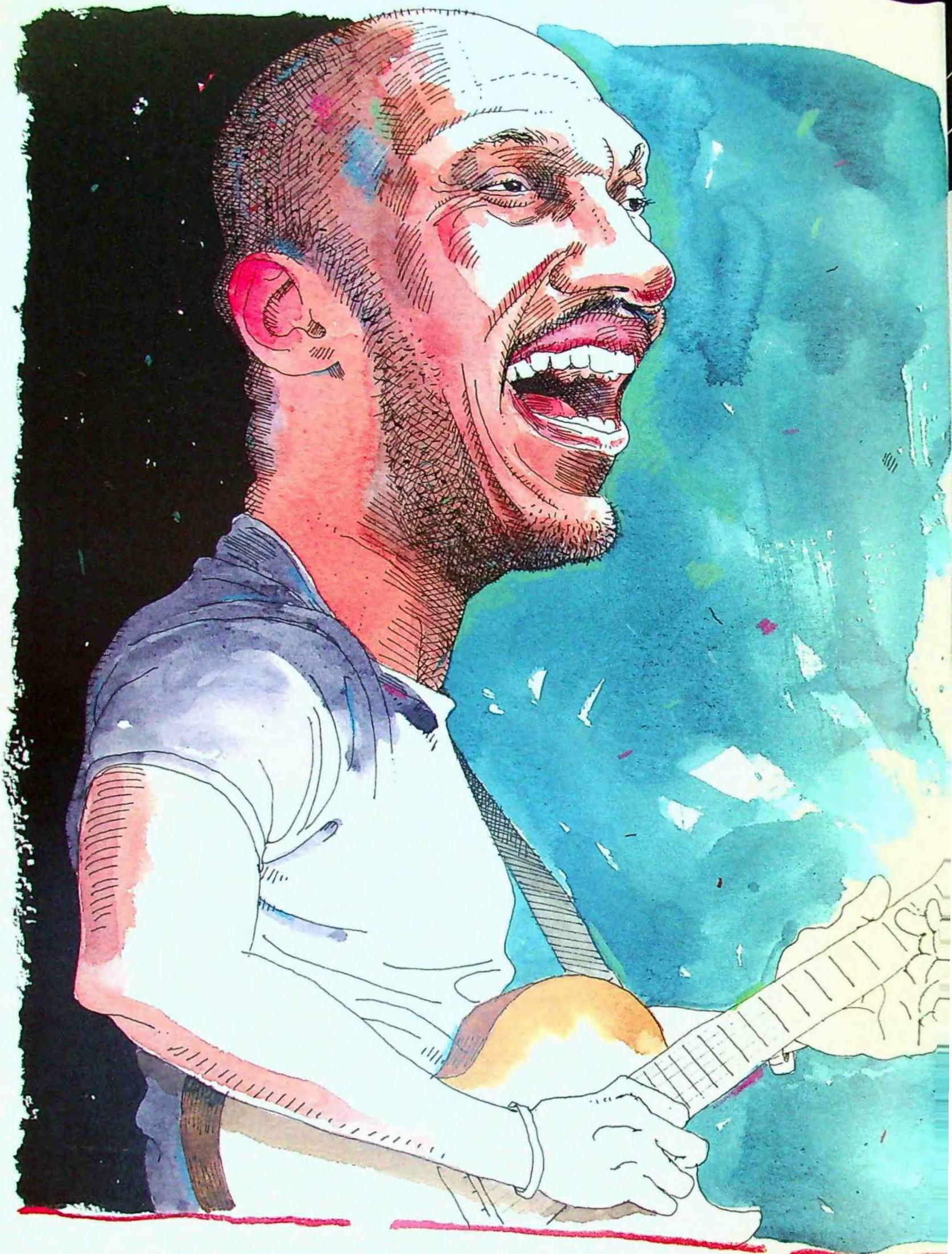
Killers of the Flower Moon isn't the only screen time for Isbell this year. During the making of his 2020 album, *Reunions*, a camera crew followed him around constantly, filming for the HBO documentary *Running with Our Eyes Closed*, the title taken from a song on the album. The film offers a deeper look into his personal life than he typically reveals, including his marriage to Shires. There's a moment when it seems as if everything is going off the rails. A snotty remark spirals downward into days of soul-searching, sleepless nights, and lengthy text messages. Because they live together, sometimes work together, and have a beautiful daughter, there's often a perception by fans that their family life is effortless. The documentary shows that, unsurprisingly, it takes heavy lifting. "It is so easy to have misperceptions about someone's life when we don't know them," says the director, Sam Jones. "The idea was to put the audience right in the center of a person's life and see what it really is. He and Amanda were willing to show that."

It's a cringe watch at times. Isbell can be moody and, despite his commanding stage presence and witty Twitter posts, sometimes racked with self-doubt. Shires often bears the brunt of trying to convince him that he doesn't have to stew on things alone. "I came from a culture where if you're the man of the house, you fix things," he says. "It's another thing to view your spouse as an equal. You know, it's that ability to not take every responsibility as yours to fix. But it's hard to let go of those things and say, This is wrong, and it might stay wrong, but I'm here and I see that it's wrong."

Isbell says that many of their friends got divorced during the pandemic, but ironically it may have been the best thing for his own marriage because it forced him and Shires to have those difficult conversations and clear the air. And it ultimately helped to distill what's truly important to him. "I arrange my day based on two things: When am I going to hang out with Mercy? And then when am I gonna get to play guitar?" he says. "I never wanted to be a firefighter, or an astronaut, or any of that boy stuff. I honestly don't remember a time when I didn't dream of being a guitar player."

A medium shot of a man with light brown hair, wearing a dark green denim jacket over a black shirt, playing a Gibson Les Paul Custom electric guitar. He is looking down at the guitar. The guitar has a distinctive cherry finish and a gold-colored pickguard. A small blue logo is visible in the top left corner of the image.

*Isbell with one of his guitars, a
1960 Gibson Les Paul Custom with
a rare cherry finish.*



HILL COUNTRY GUARDIAN

CEDRIC BURNSIDE PROPELS
NORTH MISSISSIPPI'S DISTINCTIVE BLUES *into*
the TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

By Tim Beanez → Illustration by Joe Ciardiello

On Sunday nights in the nineties, locals from northern Mississippi's hills and hollers, and sometimes a handful of adventurous tourists, gathered at Junior's, an hour's drive from Memphis in one of the South's most unforgivingly rural landscapes. Inside, the revelers sipped moonshine from glass jars and danced as trancelike jams led by the now-legendary bluesmen Junior Kimbrough and R. L. Burnside stretched into the early morning hours. ¶ Forty-four-year-old Cedric Burnside, a grandson of R. L.'s and now a Grammy-winning artist, grew up in this world. "By age ten, I was [playing] at the juke joint," he says, "and I was about thirteen years old when I joined [R. L.'s] band full-time." ¶ While he's known today for his own interpretations of the Hill Country blues style his grandfather helped create, at the time Cedric played drums behind R. L., providing the rhythmic foundation for excursions on regional standards like "Goin' Down South," "Shake 'Em On Down," and "Poor Black Mattie." But he also kept a close watch on what his "big daddy" was doing on guitar and how he communicated with his audience—lessons Cedric bookmarked for the music he began making after R. L.'s passing in 2005. ¶ Like his grandfather, Cedric uses his fingers to pick as he glides seamlessly between acoustic and electric guitar, channeling a raw, rural, and hypnotic blues. But while his sense of rhythm and swing are classic Hill Country, his ear for melody has a wide aperture, absorbing a broad range of influences that inject new energy into the canon. On a trio of recent albums—*Descendants of Hill Country* (2015), *Benton County Relic* (2018), and *I Be Trying* (2021)—he has evolved into the most potent contemporary practitioner of the tradition. We caught up with Burnside to talk about growing up in the juke joints, picking up the guitar, and the inspirations behind his own soulful take on Hill Country blues.

You grew up in a legendary musical family. Did it feel that way at the time?

As a kid, I thought it was just something normal. My big daddy [R. L.] and my dad [Calvin Jackson] and uncles, they played every other weekend. I was one of many grandchildren, just amazed by the music and out there kicking up dust. My late teens is when I started to realize how special this music was and that it was history. And that it was gonna make more history.

That must have been at Junior's, right?

It started at our house before Junior's juke joint. My big daddy was having house parties at the little shack we were staying in. People would come from miles around just to hear the music, and shortly after that I started going to Junior's. Going to the juke joint at ten years old was pretty wild, and

kind of scary and fun at the same time. Because even though I was young, I did know that it was a juke joint and people drank moonshine and other things there, and it was a place young kids shouldn't be. But I guess [since] we was playing the music, if they sent us home, then they didn't have no band. So they made an exception and let us stay.

You had a front-row seat for the Hill Country revival that took off in the nineties.

That was definitely a change for me. At the juke joint, the crowd was the same every weekend. So when I went to Canada, my first time out of the country, I had butterflies because I didn't know how they would receive the music we play. My big daddy'd say, "No no no, just do what you do at the

juke joint and everything gonna be good. Don't change nothing." Then we did the first song, and people was jumping up, clapping and whistling, and it was a beautiful, beautiful feeling. All the butterflies went away, and I was ready to lay it down.

What was it like being around R. L. in those days?

He had this aura about him that was so bright. He was my grandfather and I grew up with him, so you would think that I would be used to watching him play music, but it was so different watching him onstage do his thing and watching the audience look at him. I find myself today wanting to have that same energy, that same aura when I go up there and play my music. He gave it his all and that showed, so I try to give it my all when I play. And hopefully it shows to people.

You played drums then. How did you find your way on guitar?

I always knew it was in me. I wrote a lot of my songs [by] sounding them out with my mouth, how I wanted the music to go. But I picked up the guitar for the first time around 2003 and started trying to get serious about that. I got tired of sounding things out with my mouth. The guitar players would get as close as they could, which was great, the song still came out good—but it wasn't what I heard in my head.

Once you set out on your own, you were pretty successful right away. Did it catch you off guard?

I know my music is different from any other blues you would probably listen to, and for that I am grateful. I like to be different. Having all the accolades and all the awards, it made me feel real good about my accomplishments [and] the hard work I put in to get where I am today. When I started writing my own music, playing my own guitar, people caught hold of it. They started liking my lyrics and my grooves, and I knew then, even before the Grammys, even before the National Endowment [for the Arts, which named him a National Heritage Fellow in 2021], I knew that I had something special. I do it because I love it and it's in my heart, and I knew if I kept on the right track and

didn't let anybody interfere, it could only get greater from there.

Some Hill Country music can have an ominous feel to it, but your songs have a different vibe.

I try to write my music according to how I live my life and according to how my family lives their life. We all go through things, and I think every day we wake up, the universe is gonna give us something to write about. That might be good, that might be bad—sad things, confusing things—and the universe does that for me every day of my life. Some days I wake up and great things happen, but you got to accept the bad things, as well. I think the key to my music is staying true to myself. Even if it's embarrassing, even if it's nerve-racking, I still write about it. I know somewhere out there in the world, somebody's been there and done that. That experience made them come from the bottom to the top, or that experience made them fall from the top to the bottom.

Junior's is long gone. Where is that spirit of Hill Country music most alive today? Well, they can definitely come to Cedric Burnside's front porch. [Laughs.] You still have juke joints in Mississippi, but in North Mississippi there's not too many left. My wife and I did just purchase thirty-seven acres in Ashland, the town we stay in, and sometime in the future I am planning on putting something out there to maybe sell a little food, just like Junior Kimbrough's juke joint used to do. A few chicken wings or a few bologna sandwiches, have a few beers and listen to some Hill Country blues. So I'm planning on doing that in the near future, the good Lord willing.

So as Tyler Childers sang in "Country Squire," you're "turnin' them songs into two-by-fours."

My music is something that I want to keep alive, and the Hill Country blues is really special and unique. I want people from all over the world to come and experience that feeling, not just [me] going to their country and playing it. I love doing that, but I want them to also come into my world, come into the Hill Country world, the heart of Mississippi, and feel that music and sweat and see the mosquitoes flying all around your head while you're stomping your feet and kicking up dust.

THE NEW GUITAR GREATS

ELEVEN STANDOUT PLAYERS
KEEPING THE SOUTH'S SIX-STRING TRADITIONS FRONT AND CENTER

Illustrations by Joe Ciardiello

Honky-Tonk Warrior

Luke McQueary

① On a dreary January evening in Nashville, the line to get into Robert's Western World stretches more than twenty people deep. Robert's is the last vestige of true honky-tonk music on neon-soaked Lower Broadway, and onstage is Luke McQueary, who is absolutely shredding his solo on Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues." The twenty-two-year-old guitarist and Kentucky native is a member of Kelley's Heroes, a spin-off of the legendary Don Kelley Band, which ruled the Robert's stage for more than twenty years and served as a vital incubator for rising musicians. Don Kelley himself retired in the early months of COVID, leaving McQueary, upright bassist Joe Fick, and drummer Billy Van Vleet to continue in his absence.

McQueary's father turned him on to Kelley, and by the time he was seventeen, he was subbing in on Sunday nights before becoming a full-time player in 2020. "All I listened to as a kid was the Don Kelley Band," he says in his thick drawl over a plate of barbecue

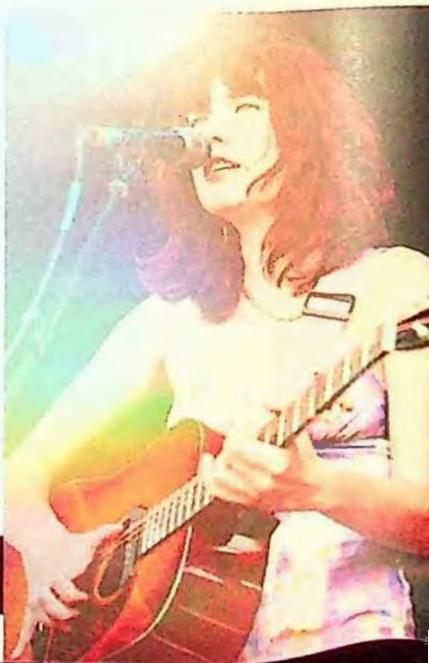
before he hits the stage. The band plays essentially the same set of covers each night, but some are almost unrecognizable thanks to the members' frenetic pace and monster solos. "We can make them sound so different than the originals," McQueary says. "Just gotta jack up the energy." With all of the hoots and hollers exploding from the crowd, mission accomplished.—MH

Bluegrass Groundbreaker

Molly Tuttle

② The first woman to win Guitar Player of the Year from the International Bluegrass Music Association (in 2017 and 2018), Molly Tuttle continues to blaze a trail both leading her own band—

Molly Tuttle performing at the Bristol Rhythm & Roots Reunion music festival.



she was nominated for two 2023 Grammys and won Best Bluegrass Album—and as an in-demand collaborator. It's easy to see why. Tuttle has been playing bluegrass since she was eight and can more than hold her own with the likes of Sam Bush or Billy Strings with her virtuosic flat-picking, clawhammer, and cross-picking skills. But let's face it: The guitar has too often been perceived as a man's domain. Tuttle is having none of that. "As a female guitarist, I initially struggled to take risks on my instrument because I felt the need to prove myself and not make mistakes," she says. "Over the years, I've become more improvisational and spontaneous." —MH

Rock Steady

Sadler Vaden

History is filled with great guitar duos: Duane Allman and Dickey Betts. Keith Richards and Brian Jones (or Mick Taylor, or current partner Ronnie Wood). But it's tough to come up with a modern-era double guitar attack as potent as Sadler Vaden and Jason Isbell. Vaden fell in love with rock guitar after his parents took him to see a 1996 Farm Aid show in Columbia, South Carolina, headlined by Neil Young and Crazy Horse. "It was so noisy, angry, and loud," he recalls. "I was instantly hooked." He began playing professionally at eighteen, when he realized he was better at playing guitar than "playing a high school student," and after a stint with Southern legends Drivin N Cryin, he joined Isbell's band, the 400 Unit, in 2013. The two have developed an almost innate chemistry, and Vaden is just as comfortable playing rhythm or lead, putting out three albums of his own that show off his versatility. "It's about serving the song," he says. "I play my part within a framework of another. But rhythm is always the driver of rock and roll, and it seems like a lost art today." —MH

The Genre Bender

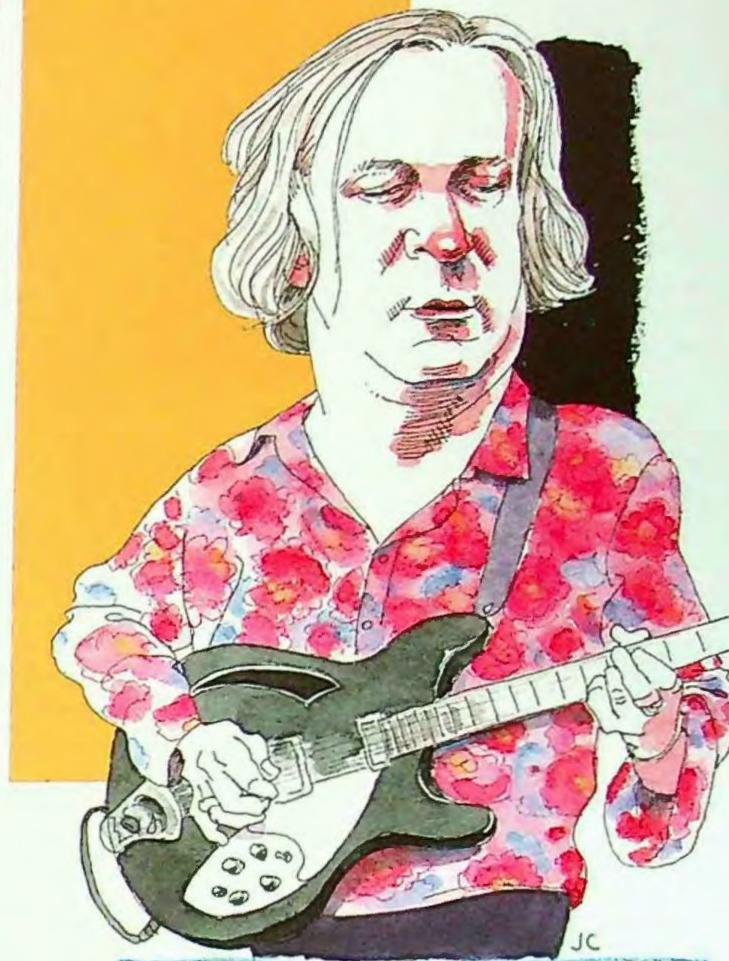
Samantha Fish

With each evolution of her sound, Kansas City-bred guitarist and singer-songwriter Samantha Fish has proved she's always thinking of her next move. "You can stack my releases up back-to-back and hear this natural progression," she says. Growing up in a city known for its jazz and jump-blues history—where the Count Basie Orchestra began electrifying audiences with its "hot" improvisation in 1935—Fish quickly made the connections between her rock-and-roll idols and the blues. Both traditions inform her approach, along with torch-singer soul and the locomotive rhythm and blues played in Mississippi's Hill Country. "I'm just trying to create something that sounds timeless," she says. "That's always been my goal." On *Faster*, her 2021 Rounder Records release, she worked with producer Martin Kierszenbaum (Lady Gaga) to create a set of spunky, pop-focused cuts, and her latest—*Death Wish Blues*, a collaboration with outlaw country figure Jesse Dayton—channels those same impulses through a fuzz box with the grit set to eleven. —JB

The New Newgrass King

Billy Strings

During a concert in the summer of 2019, Billy Strings divided a crowd as if he were Moses parting the sea. The progressive bluegrass fans were mesmerized with his maniacal picking. The traditionalists weren't quite sure what to make of him, though one old-timer admitted "that kid can sure play." That he can. And while he's perfectly capable of whipping out some Bill Monroe tunes, fans know a song from Jimi Hendrix or



Rock Pioneer

PETER BUCK

Few guitarists can say they helped create a genre. In 1982, after punk rock had peaked, R.E.M. released its debut EP, *Chronic Town*, a collection of jangly guitar pop that helped make the band's home of Athens, Georgia, the epicenter of the burgeoning "college rock" scene. With his intricate arrangements on songs like "Pretty Persuasion," from 1984's *Reckoning* (not to mention the instantly recognizable mandolin on the band's biggest hit, 1991's "Losing My Religion"), Buck influenced countless other guitarists in alternative and folk music circles. Then in 1994, the band released *Monster*, a greasy collection of rock and roll fueled by Buck's feedback-laden Les Paul. "We wanted to get away from who we were," he said in the album's twenty-fifth anniversary edition liner notes. They did, and it was divisive among fans, but greatness arrives via taking risks, and Buck has achieved it, one power chord at a time. —MH

Carl "Buffalo" Nichols at his studio in Milwaukee.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ZOE RAIN





the Grateful Dead might be next on the set list. In less than four years, Strings and his crack band have gone from playing clubs and small festivals to headlining arenas through sheer road doggedness and the breathtaking prowess of their instrumentation. "I love how he weaves together old-school bluegrass influences like Doc Watson with pedals, heavy-metal scales, and other more modern elements to make a sound that's all his own," says Strings's friend Molly Tuttle. "I love how he stays so true to himself." —MH

Blues Explorer

Buffalo Nichols

6 When Mississippi's Fat Possum Records signed Carl "Buffalo" Nichols, the storied label behind the late-career resurgences of R. L. Burnside and Junior Kimbrough hadn't taken on a new solo blues artist in nearly two decades. But that's the enthusiasm the Texas-born, Milwaukee-raised Nichols brings to the table. He grew up listening to his parents' Robert Cray and B.B. King records and started playing guitar at a young age, but it was a trip in his early twenties through West Africa and Europe, where he discovered Ukrainian and Carpathian folk styles, that helped inspire a renewed interest in American blues and folk traditions. "I wanted to reimagine what the blues would sound like if it hadn't lost its cultural importance for so long," he says. "It just became less interesting and less progressive, and there's less risk taken by the artists, and I feel like that's the part that's missing." His self-titled 2021 debut explores his homeland's country-blues idiom without treating it like a relic or curiosity, but rather as a vital document of life in twenty-first-century America. —JB

LIVING LEGENDS



Dynamite Duo

SUSAN TEDESCHI AND DEREK TRUCKS

You could call Susan Tedeschi and Derek Trucks the First Couple of Guitar Royalty. Trucks is, of course, the savant, joining the Allman Brothers Band in 1999 when he was only twenty while fronting his own band. Tedeschi, a Massachusetts native and Berklee College of Music grad, had her own successful solo career before pairing up with Trucks, first as life partners in 2001, then forming the Tedeschi Trucks Band in 2010. Along with lead vocal duties, Tedeschi adds subtle interplay while her husband wails away, but don't sleep on her guitar chops: Check out the band's cover of Bobby Bland's "I Pity the Fool" (Google their 12/4/21 show at Boston's Orpheum Theatre) and watch her noodle on her Gibson as the song unfolds before she rips into a searing solo. Trucks sports a massive grin as he eggs her on before the two meet for a crushing finale.—MH

The Natural
Marcus King

7 Marcus King's first memory, from sometime in the late nineties, is of discovering his dad's Epiphone El Dorado acoustic guitar while he was away at work. "He must've had it tuned to open, because when I strummed it, it made some form of a chord," he recalls, "and I've been chasing that high ever since." Widely acknowledged as one of today's most skilled and versatile guitarists, King, who grew up in Greenville, South Carolina, was playing Carolina bars by his early teens, and at seventeen he hit the road with his eight-piece Marcus King Band. He's been touring almost nonstop since, in between putting out three albums of soul-rooted Southern jam rock with his band, plus two more on his own with Dan Auerbach of the Black Keys producing. His latest, 2022's boogie-rocker *El Dorado*, takes its title from the guitar and the Cadillac model of the same name, both of which now reside at his Nashville home. "My parents brought me a housewarming gift, and it was that guitar," he says. "I had the El Dorado out front, and I had moved to Nashville, which was my City of Gold. It was really full-circle stuff." —JB

Alyssa Gribben



Larkin Poe sisters Rebecca (left) and Megan Lovell, with her signature slide guitar, photographed outside of Nashville. Opposite: South Carolina native Marcus King.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ERIC RYAN ANDERSON



8 **Guitar-playing sisters** Rebecca and Megan Lovell, better known as the blues-rock duo Larkin Poe, come from a classically trained musical background, playing violin and piano from sheet music. So when they first attended the annual bluegrass jam MerleFest in North Carolina when they were twelve and thirteen, respectively, a new realm of possibilities unfolded. "We were blown away by the improvisation that was happening on-stage, and the idea of songwriting and coming up with your own stuff on the spot was very novel to us," Megan says. When Rebecca was fifteen, she became the youngest person to win a mandolin contest at the festival, but now she's usually seen playing a traditional six-string alongside Megan, who dons her signature slide guitar. When they're not self-producing their own records, like their 2022 set *Blood Harmony*—which doesn't leave much downtime these days—they enjoy the challenge of backing other artists, including Elvis Costello, Steven Tyler, and the late Tom Petty. "We love placing ourselves in creative situations where you have no idea what's gonna happen," Rebecca says. "You're requiring yourself to be spontaneous and to dig deep and find something new." —JB



*John Osborne, of Brothers Osborne,
at his Pine Box studio in Nashville.
Opposite: Christone "Kingfish" Ingram
playing at Ground Zero Blues Club in
Clarksdale, Mississippi.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALYSSE GAFKJEN

Country Rocker
John Osborne

At his East Nashville studio, John Osborne has just finished playing two new songs from the upcoming Brothers Osborne album when he gets word that Jeff Beck has died at seventy-eight. Beck was a guitarist's guitarist, never reaching the commercial heights of his peers like Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page, but an extraordinary talent who could make his instrument sound like it was talking to you. That resonates with Osborne. "I was a shy, nerdy kid growing up, and the guitar gave me a voice to speak with," he says. "It still allows me to get out some complex things in my subconscious that I'm not able to do verbally."

Over the course of the band's three albums, Osborne has established himself as one of Nashville's premier players, likened to the second coming of Duane Allman or Lynyrd Skynyrd's Allen Collins. In fact, some Brothers Osborne fans have tabbed the band's hit "Stay a Little Longer," with its multiple sections, as a modern-day, country "Free Bird." Osborne says he wrote the guitar part as a kind of homage to influences such as the Eagles, the Allman Brothers, and even U2. Ironically, it's John's brother and the band's lead singer, TJ Osborne, who often comes up with the hooks on hits such as "Shoot Me Straight" and "Rum." "TJ's a great guitarist, but it's not his first instrument," Osborne says. "He comes at it

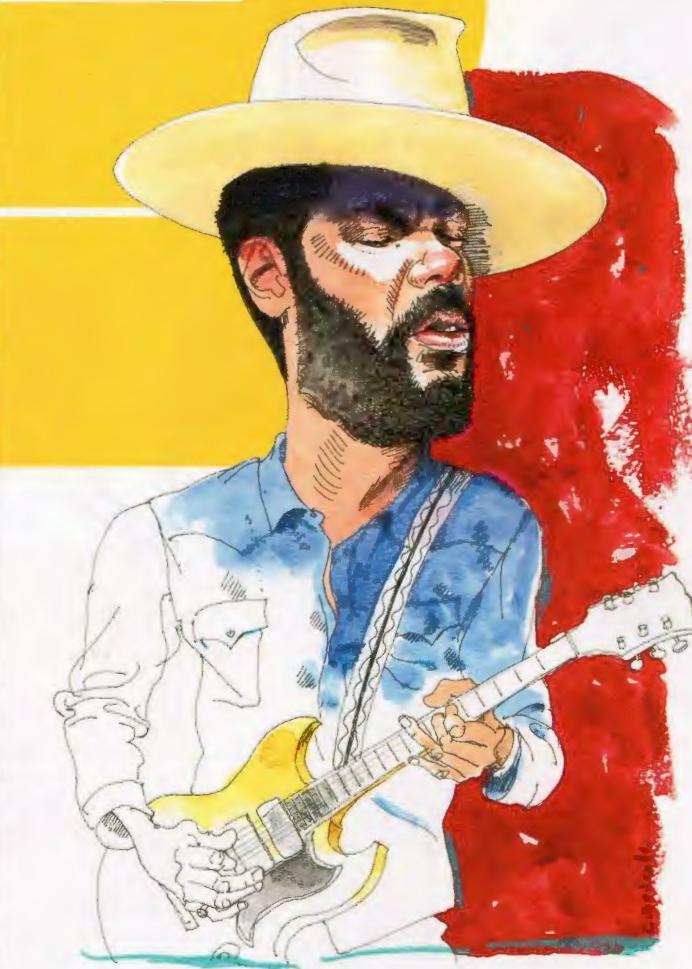
from a very primal, visceral place. I appreciate that. A guitar player like me always wants to make things more complicated."—MH

Delta Star
Christone "Kingfish" Ingram

Clarksdale, Mississippi, blues guitarist and singer-songwriter Christone "Kingfish" Ingram first captured attention as a teenage blues prodigy. Now when the twenty-four-year-old channels the grace of B.B. King and the fire of Jimi Hendrix, it's clear he's grown into his crown as the new King of the Delta Blues. On his latest album, the Grammy-winning 662, named for the Mississippi area code, Ingram addresses the joy and pain of living in the Delta, as on the slow-burning "Another Life Goes By," which confronts listeners with the region's lingering social ills and features a verse from fellow Mississippian Big K.R.I.T. on a recent remix. Musically, he draws inspiration from both the Delta greats and contemporary R&B and guitar influences like Prince and Eric Gales. This year, Ingram will get to repay his mentor, Buddy Guy, who paid for his first album, by opening select dates on the blues legend's final tour. "It's a beautiful thing just to be end to end with him," Ingram says, "and to reflect on everything that he's done for me in the past."—JB



LIVING LEGEND



Lone Star Original

GARY CLARK JR.

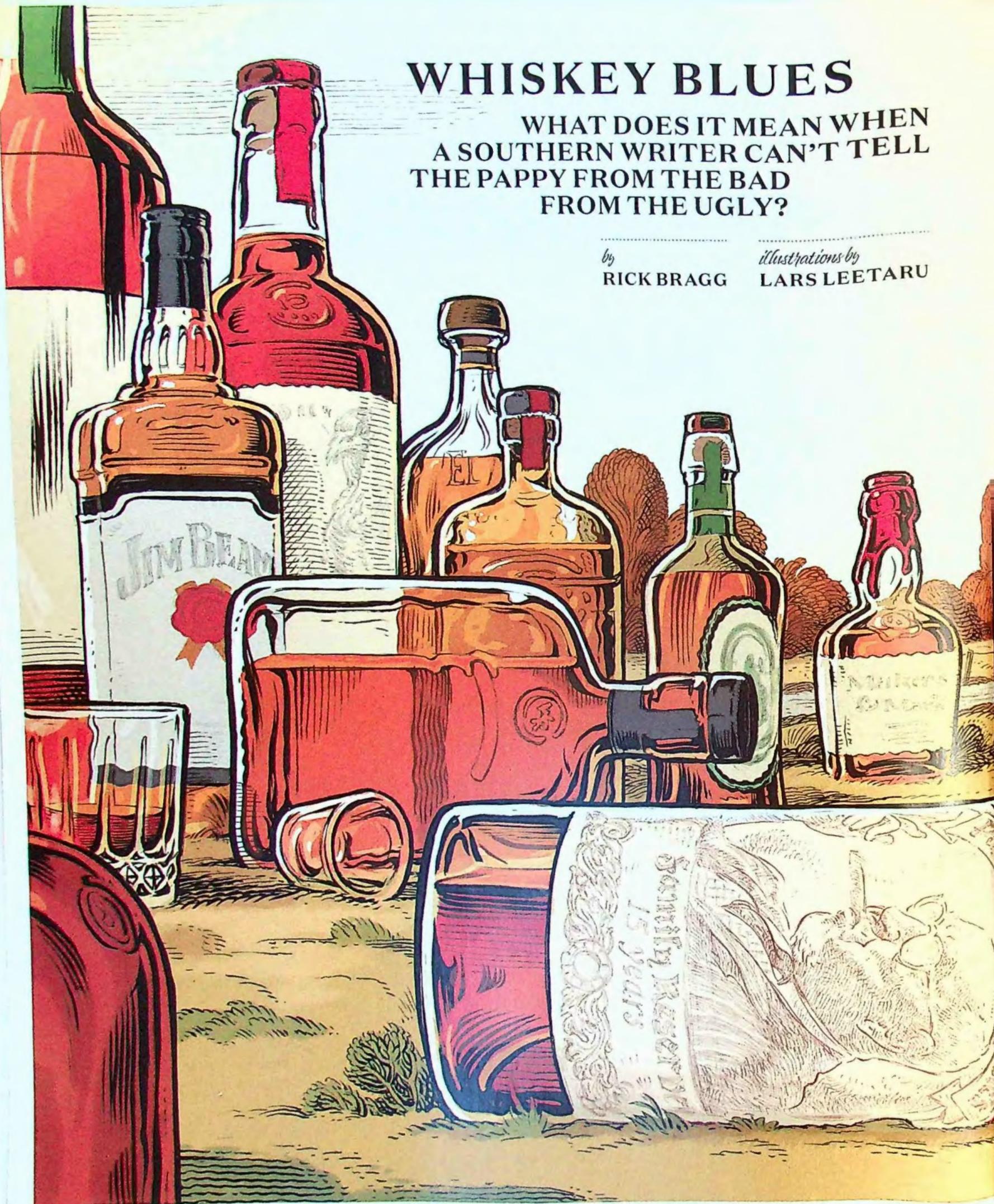
An Austin native, Gary Clark Jr. is the latest in the pantheon of Texas blues legends, following in the steps of Blind Lemon Jefferson, T-Bone Walker, and Stevie Ray Vaughan. He was impressive from the jump: The late longtime Austin club owner Clifford Antone gave him his first gig when Clark was a blues-obsessed fifteen-year-old. But over the course of three albums, he has proved to be a singular artist, deftly incorporating funk, soul, and even hip-hop influences into his arsenal of riffs. The blues remains front and center, though, and Clark is doing his part to carry the mantle: He's hard at work on his fourth album, which will undoubtedly bring more fireworks coming from his Gibson Epiphone than a Fourth of July blowout.—MH ☑

WHISKEY BLUES

WHAT DOES IT MEAN WHEN
A SOUTHERN WRITER CAN'T TELL
THE PAPPY FROM THE BAD
FROM THE UGLY?

by
RICK BRAGG

illustrations by
LARS LEETARU







liked to run hot, but I made it all the way to the middle of nowhere before it finally blew a radiator hose and died in the ditch. I stepped out into a green-gray cloud of scalding steam, cursing all the Pontiacs that Michigan ever made. ¶ I looked north, then south. Nothing. The closest garage or parts house was twenty miles away, and I couldn't remember the last farmhouse or mobile home I had seen. I waited twenty minutes before I saw a car, then, five minutes later, another; they didn't even slow down. I threw my necktie into the back seat—I did not want to die in a clip-on—and started walking. The asphalt shimmered in front of me, bottle caps stamped down into the soft tar. ¶ I didn't really notice the truck, an ancient Ford, till it rolled up beside me. An old man in overalls and a begrimed undershirt,

one knobby elbow out the window, looked me up and down.

I was a country boy myself, or at least I had been. Hard to tell, I guess, in that Ban-Lon shirt smoldering across my back.

"Whar's yore hat?" was all he said, like I was an imbecile left to wander in the weeds.

I crawled into the cab. It smelled of burnt motor oil and gasoline and old beer. I knew it would.

"Thar's a parts house in Heflin," he said. He didn't even consider driving to a house and calling a tow truck. Any fool could change a radiator hose.

"Got any water?" I asked, and he just shook his head and handed me a pint bottle of whiskey, the kind bootleggers sell in every dry county in the world.

"I better not," I said. "I'm workin'."

He just looked all around us, at the wide-open, broad, green nothing. If ever there was a land made for secrets, it was Clay County, Alabama.

I unscrewed the cap and took a slash...

I still can't really describe it, how it seared and abraded my throat. I imagined broken glass, in a puddle of burning gasoline.

AAAAARRRRGGGHHHH, my mind screamed.

But I did not cough and sputter, as they do in the movies. Steam did not pour from my ears, like in the cartoons. I did not pray to Jesus. Back then, young men did not act a fool in front of their elders.

I just thanked him, hoarsely, and wiped away a tear.

He took a slash himself and, as the miles passed beneath us, poured out his wisdom on inexpensive alcohol.

"See, son, your cheap liquor won't hurt a man's insides, because it's weaker than that fancy whiskey, like that Jack Dan-

first lesson in brown whiskey came forty-odd years ago, in a time of bad sideburns and slick leisure suits and eight-track troubadours. I seem to remember Tanya Tucker calling to me from the dashboard, and the Alabama sun burning through the open window of my metal-flake-brown Pontiac Grand Prix. I was a newspaper guy then, on my way to a story I can no longer recall. The Pontiac

iel's, or that Kentucky bourbon," he said. "That'll burn a hole right through you."

If cheap liquor could kill a man, he said, there wouldn't be any poor men left to walk on God's green earth. It would just be Lutherans and teetotalers and rich men, and what a sorry place that would be.

That logic did not sound precisely right to me, but I nodded anyway. I'd only had three swallows, and I was already pretty well drunk, for daytime.

I told him the truth; I never had tasted any good liquor.

He told me, in all his long life, he never had, either.

Twenty years later, I sat at a table in Midtown Manhattan with a small gathering of writers and editors, expatriated Southerners who had followed their dreams and ambitions to West Forty-Second Street, Broadway, and Park Avenue; if ever there had been a caucus of people who knew their brown liquor, this was it. Expensive bottles gleamed behind the bar as waiters brought out some of the finest alcohol Kentucky and Tennessee ever made. "Rich folks' liquor," my uncles would have called it, but they would have said it with respect. There were bottles there, glinting amber and gold, that cost more than my Grand Prix.

Someone passed me a glass, and I took a gentlemanly sip.

AAAAARRRRGGGHHHH, my mind screamed.

And right then, I knew. I could barely tell the difference between a two-hundred-dollar bottle of brown liquor in an overpriced restaurant and a two-dollar snort from an old man's traveling whiskey on the road to Lineville.

There was just something missing in

me, something that should have been inherent. I had grown into a man believing that there were just some things a man needed to know, no matter what class he was born to, like how to tie fishing lures, and spot good shotguns, and sharpen a knife. And a man should know brown liquor, from the well brands in a honky-tonk to the bottle gathering dust in a rich man's will and testament.

I was born to know it; my grandpa made corn whiskey in the deep hollers of the mountain South and did time in Atlanta when the Federals ran him down on a pulpwood road. My kin drank. Whiskey was as essential as air. Sobriety, we truly believed, was a rock we crawled upon only to die.

I remember seeing my uncle Jimbo stand on a riverbank with a pint of Tennessee whiskey in his fist, remember seeing him turn it up till it was all gone, remember the look of wonder on his face, as if he had discovered something in the bottom of that thin, flat bottle that no one had ever experienced before.

And he would make a sound, a sound that was part exultation, part scream.

Now I know it was just a rebel yell.

If it was only fair whiskey, he would bait his hook, find a tree to lean against, and fall asleep. If it was good whiskey, he would do a little buck dance by the water's edge, tell lies till he was out of breath, and sing every song Jimmie Rodgers ever made.

I, of all people, should have the gift.
I'm a writer, for God's sake.
I'm a Southern writer.

Find a sober one.
Go ahead.
Try.

I always understood the escape that brown liquor could bring. It provided a rare peace of mind, a cloudy goodwill. Once, in a bar in Uptown New Orleans, I toasted the LSU Tigers. I hate the LSU Tigers.

But if a man can't really tell the difference between rough and smooth, between good and bad, then he is a philistine. It was just anesthesia. I drank less and less. The myth of fine alcohol was just that: myth.

Yet, even when I confessed, when I told people of my ignorance, they seemed not to hear. Nice people kept pouring fancy liquor down me, believing I had some kind of divine rod in my bones. I had written books about whiskey men, hadn't I? I tried to tell them I didn't drink much, but people still did it, engaging me on caramel coloring and smoky hints and charred barrels while lamenting the heist of a treasure trove of Pappy Van Winkle. I thought "Pappy Van Winkle" was a nursery rhyme.

Somehow, bizarrely, I even developed a reputation for the drinking I did not do.

"Is poor ol' Rick still having trouble with the bottle?" someone would say.

"He can't help it, bless his heart," someone would answer. "You know, his people was always that way."

I know this because of another well-meaning soul, who would report on the conversation, and then pat me on the arm. The beautiful thing about Southerners is how happy they are to tell you all the evil things that other people say about you.

It was even said that I had a phantom bottle of aged whiskey in my desk drawer, the way old newspapermen and authors used to do. Instead, I only had an ancient, gummy peppermint and a three-year-old pouch of Delta Air Lines peanuts.

I found it easier, in time, to just go along with it all. It made me picturesque. I always wanted to be picturesque.

I accepted glass after glass, joining in conversations on Gentleman Jack or Jim Beam Black, on the differences between the craftsmen of Kentucky bourbon and Tennessee whiskey, between Scotch and Irish, blended and single malt...and on and on. But even as I got older, it all still tasted alike, all tasted harsh; even the smoothest brown whiskey tasted like green persimmons to me.

And I'd just nod and say, "Man, that's smooooooth."

No one ever seemed to notice that when I got up from the table, the glass was still mostly full. I have poured good whiskey on the sand. I have, literally, watered the plants in restaurants.

Someone told me, awhile back, they had heard I had finally quit drinking. I sure was glad to hear that.

But then I heard I had relapsed and was back in my cups again. That's the way it is with imaginary whiskey. Once it gets its imaginary claws in you, it's almost impossible to imaginarily yank that imaginary monkey off your back.

*M*aybe I was, I wondered, just not destined to like brown liquor. Maybe I was, strange as it might seem, a martini man.

Nope. Vermouth reminded of the time I accidentally ate a Wet-Nap at the Kentucky Fried Chicken in Sylacauga.

I was relieved to learn this. Martini drinkers all seemed like people I would like to punch in the snoot.

It was the same with all other cocktails. Designer vodka tasted like paint thinner; fine, dry gin tasted medicinal. Unless you were in the jungle, being carried off by mosquitoes and malaria, there didn't seem to be any point. High-end tequila tasted like soap. Sherry tasted like cough drops.

I had a Manhattan once. I do not possess the words. Goat sputum, maybe.

I hoped, sincerely, it would be different with rum; I had, after all, spent much of my writing life in tropic-tinged places like Haiti, Miami, and New Orleans. Maybe this was the brown liquor I was meant to drink and love. Pirates drank rum. Revolutions were fueled by it.

Nada. I couldn't differentiate a five-hundred-dollar bottle of rum, distilled in the bloody heart of a revolution and smuggled out of the country on the last plane out, from the rum I had inside a plastic pirate's head on spring break 1977 in Panama City Beach.

I had, just once, an inkling of the devotion some drinkers had for brown liquor. A company in Haiti distills a rum called Barbancourt. In it, you can smell the charcoal fires that people use to cook their meals, taste the raw sugarcane. The wet air is thick with ghosts there. You can taste them in it, too.

I watched democracy break out over a glass of it, sitting in a Pétion-Ville bar as, outside, someone threw rocks against the wall. And I tasted, ever so quick, the spirit of the place. And then it was gone.

other buddies in a Birmingham bar, in the 1980s. He did five shots of Wild Turkey and accused the waitress of serving him watered-down booze.

"Miss? Miss?" he said, "I think this whiskey is defective."

That is a connoisseur.

Now I am old and no longer care, but I am forced to admit that, in my lifetime, brown liquor was the conspirator in just about everything I wrote. I remember drinking rum with a man accused of blowing a jetliner from the sky in his private war against Fidel Castro, because politics should only be discussed while drinking, he said, and only in Spanish. I remember sipping whiskey in a bar in New Orleans, watching a woman dance like a snake across the floor; I am pretty sure she was the devil. I remember riding my motorcycle to a white-sand beach on the Coosa River with a Tupperware jug of premixed Jack and Coke, remember lying in the hot sun amid a bunch of backsiding Baptists, thinking life would never be so good again. I remember a gagging sip of illegal, forbidden whiskey on a rooftop in Peshawar, Pakistan, and a strong, long pull of bourbon smuggled into the Fox Theatre in Atlanta,

NO ONE EVER SEEMED TO NOTICE THAT WHEN I GOT UP FROM THE TABLE, MY GLASS WAS STILL MOSTLY FULL. I HAVE POURED GOOD WHISKEY ON THE SAND. I HAVE, LITERALLY, WATERED THE PLANTS IN RESTAURANTS

*O*bviously, I was defective. But in time, as pretension of any kind began to matter less and less to me, I came to wonder if perhaps I was fine, and the rest of the entire, liquor-sipping world was putting me on.

I went to a bourbon tasting at one writing event, just to see if one of those experts would actually use the words "fruity bouquet." No one did, but I heard "essence of oak" and "hints of vanilla" a lot.

If brown liquor was so nuanced, I reasoned, why did so many people consume it in something called "shots"? Gunslingers, hard-boiled gumshoes, flinty-eyed molls, clenched-jawed marines, all "knocked back" their liquor almost contemptuously. It did not even register on their palates before it entered their bloodstreams. Only the rich folks had time to sip, and to speculate.

I remember a drinking night with my lifelong friend Greg Garrison and some

as Tom Petty sang me to sleep. I remember drinking with freedom fighters, and football coaches, and my father, but that was just in a dream. I even drank Southern Comfort once with Gennifer Flowers, and then she sang me a song; by God, top that.

And once, on a long afternoon in the Mississippi Delta, I drank rotgut whiskey with a notorious bluesman named T-Model Ford. He kept his whiskey behind the seat of his truck, next to his .38. I asked him, blearily, how many men he had killed.

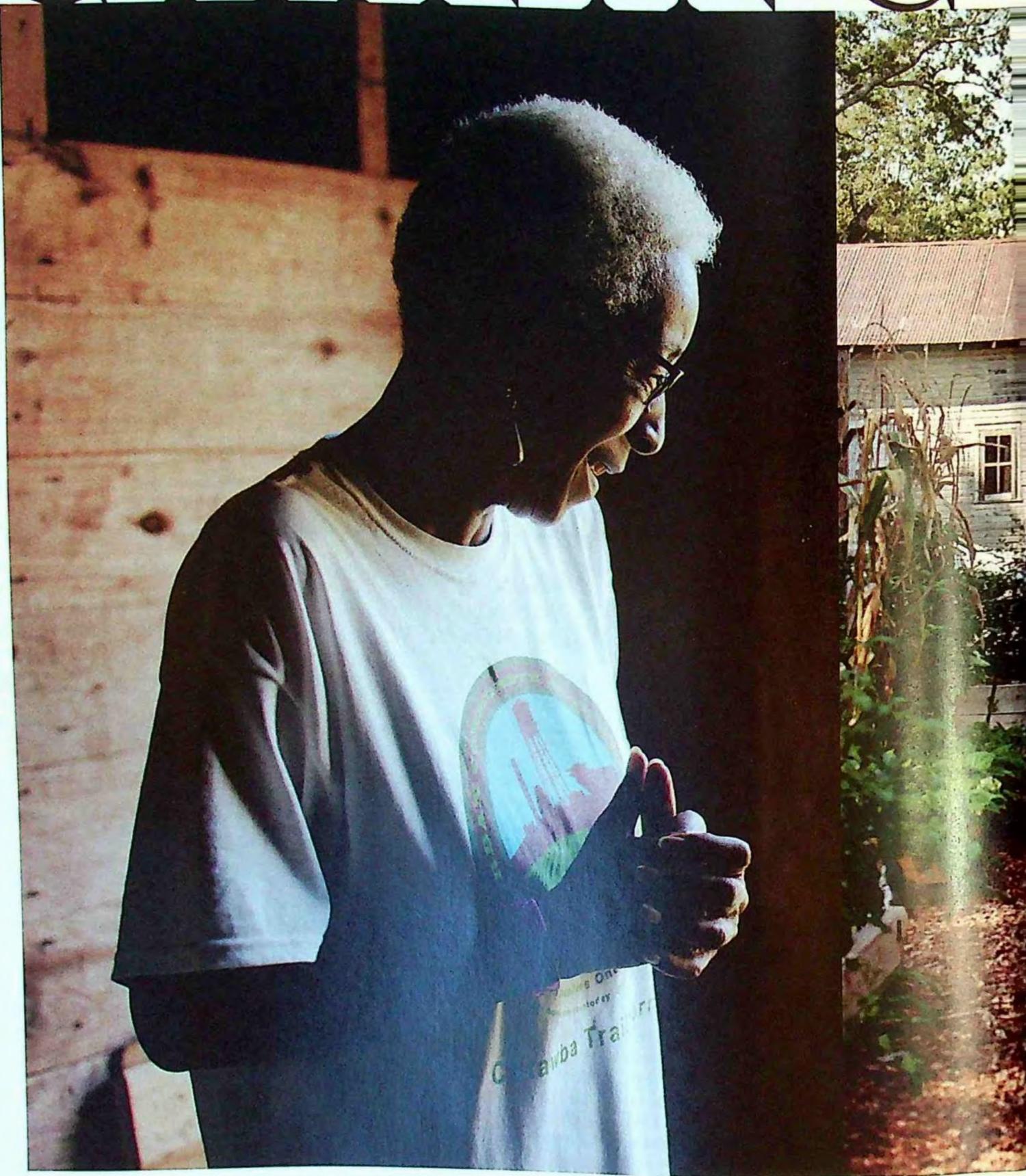
"Does it count," he said, "if I run over 'em with my Pontiac?"

The liquor runs through it all.
Liquor, and Pontiacs.

I wonder, sometimes, what happened to that old man in Clay County. I'd like to tell him what became of me.

He would probably just unscrew the cap on that bad whiskey and ask me if, in my world travels, I ever found me a hat. ☐

GAJUNUNG



Delphine Sellars; the old millhouse, soon to become a demonstration kitchen.



GROUND

On a former North Carolina plantation, a land conservancy and two determined sisters are pioneering a model for providing land to Black gardeners and farmers

by
CYNTHIA R. GREENLEE

photographs by
KENNEDI CARTER

ON AUGUST 11, 1865, AN ANXIOUS PAUL CAMERON WROTE IN a letter to his father-in-law, "My old slaves seem resolved to hold on to me or to my lands."

The wealthy North Carolina planter was determined to give them neither. In the months after the Civil War ended, a new reality emerged, anathema to his seigneurial sensibilities: having to negotiate with formerly enslaved workers whom he'd owned only months before.

The freedpeople who stayed on his plantation showed predictable signs of dissatisfaction. Cameron had enlisted a federal officer to tell them that they had absolutely no rights to the land they'd tended in captivity. When some laborers refused to work on Cameron's terms, they faced eviction or cuts to their rations.

More than 150 years later, Delphine Sellars and her sister, Lucille Patterson, first set foot on one of the Cameron family plantations in Durham, called Snow Hill, knowing little about that dark history. Instead, Sellars cared about who owned the acreage in the present: Triangle Land Conservancy (TLC), a nonprofit that protects natural resources, which had agreed to consider letting the sisters use the land.

That day in 2016, the property sat in disarray. Massive trees were strewn about like a giant's abandoned pickup sticks. The only road in and out became a car-stalling mud bath after rain. A two-story stable and other outbuildings stood dangerously dilapidated or encircled by brambles.

Sellars didn't mind—she was envisioning what the onetime plantation, founded in the late 1700s and operated well into the twentieth century, could be. A former social worker who had headed Durham County's extension office, Sellars had spent nearly a decade managing programs that helped home gardeners and farmers grow sustainable produce. Now she imagined a farm, where people could raise their own food and she could establish an incubator for new and future farmers through the nonprofit UCAN, short for Urban Community AgriNomics, which the sisters had recently launched to encourage gardening and fight food insecurity. "I was giddy," Sellars, who is sixty-nine, recalls. "It was gorgeous."

Patterson—Sellars's younger sibling by two years—saw something quite different: a nearly insurmountable cleanup job. "I looked at Delphine and said, 'Have you bumped your head?'" UCAN had less than \$300 in the bank. But they agreed on one point: They wanted land. And they'd have to persuade TLC to help them secure it.

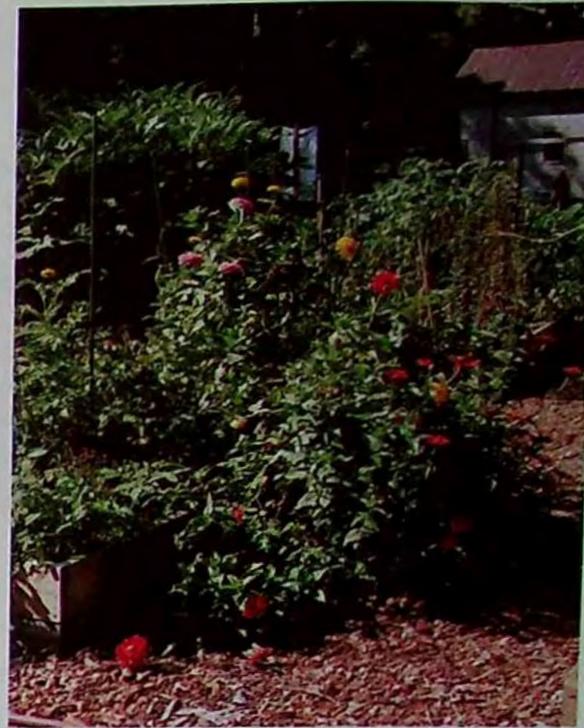
Now the sisters are on the cusp of finally fully getting their wish—not just to lease the spread, as they have the past five years, but for their nonprofit to own and manage it, in a deal that could model



for the national conservation movement how to easily redistribute land to Black institutions and individuals. In time, the sisters hope this seemingly radical move, which would be one of the nation's largest transfers of land-conservancy property to an African-American-led nonprofit, will spark other such organizations to let go of acreage they've stewarded, to boost land access among Black people in a country that's benefited from their dispossession.

N A WINTER MORNING, I MEET SELLARS ON THE OLD Snow Hill plantation grounds, near the Durham city line. She's parked in her trusty pickup, multitasking on her cell phone as usual; there's no office space yet. Still, the property—renamed Catawba Trail Farm—is a far cry from the neglected estate she saw on that 2016 tour.

When TLC first agreed to let Sellars and company use the land, the sisters and volunteers tried to clear it with good intentions and



Clockwise from left: Yard-long beans at Catawba Trail Farm; the farm's millwright building; zinnias; Lucille Patterson.



chain saws. That amateur attempt failed—"We thought we were going to be Paul Bunyan," Patterson quips—but today there's an air of organized industry here. The scent of sawdust drifts from the old millhouse, which they are transforming into a demonstration kitchen for canning classes and other lessons. Heaps of metal poles dot the ground, the puzzle pieces for a high-tunnel greenhouse; there, Sellars tells me, UCAN will grow, among other produce, peppers destined for a hot-sauce maker. She beams as she pulls a tarp from a sparkling "gently used" donated tractor, with fewer than a hundred hours of wear and tear. Soon, they will also clear a few acres of woodland to provide plots for new farmers in training.

The forty-seven raised beds that members rent for a hundred dollars a year lie mostly winter-dormant behind a deer fence. But come spring, they'll bustle with gardeners like the high school visual arts teacher and mother of three Amber Carroll Santibañez. After Santibañez planted a home garden for her son's birthday in remembrance of Ahmaud Arbery, the young Black man gunned down in 2020 by white men while he was jogging in Georgia, one of her students who helped with that healing project suggested she check out Catawba Trail Farm, where the pupil's father volunteered. When Santibañez showed up, she recognized Patterson, who had been her boss at her first-ever job as a camp counselor decades ago.

"During the pandemic, and after [the births of] both my second and my third child, I have been managing postpartum anxiety," says Santibañez, whose raised bed still has collards holding strong. "So the garden has been therapy....During the summer, I [went] there every morning. It was a welcome task to go look for squash

bugs and be with plants. You can find a lot of wisdom from nature." She is now helping the farm create a children's garden.

As I sit down with Sellars at a picnic table, she confides that she won't be entirely comfortable until the ink on the farm's land deal is dry. "We're in a 'Mother, may I?' situation," she says. "To get electricity, I need [TLC's] permission. To get a well, I need permission." And she's not that kind of person. As she says later, "I'm a doer."

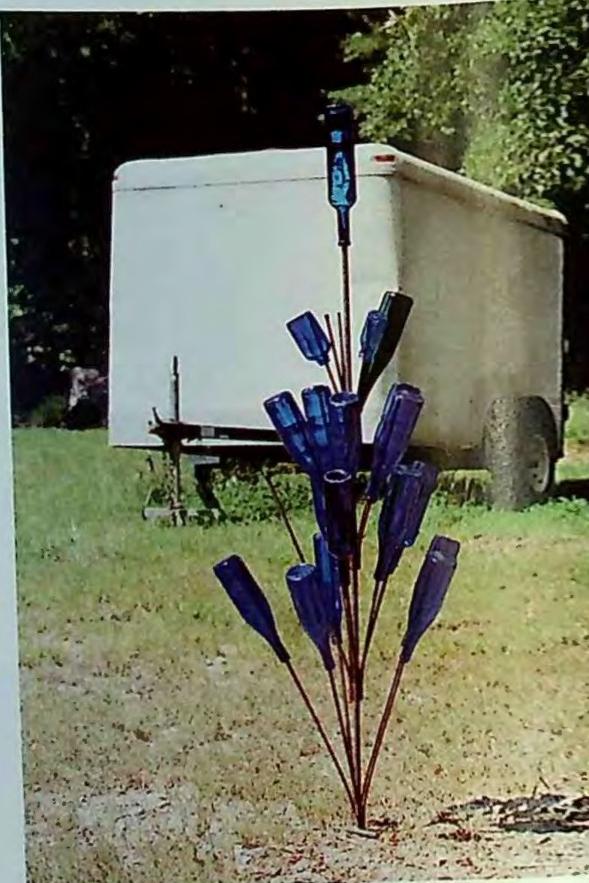
When she's at the farm, she's always on the move, easily spotted by her long-legged stride and halo of white, close-cropped hair. By winter's end, if all goes as planned, she'll be able to make her own decisions with Patterson and other UCAN board members. Using a conservation easement, which restricts development rights and lowers property values, TLC plans to sell UCAN the fifty-three acres that currently compose Catawba Trail Farm, plus an additional 123 acres of adjoining land. Altogether, Sellars estimates, the parcel could easily go for \$3 million in the hot Research Triangle real estate market. UCAN will get it for \$37,000.

B

BEFORE THE UNITED STATES EVEN EXISTED, THE land on which Catawba Trail Farm lies stood out as valuable. Native Americans carved the Great Indian Trading Path through there, as it stretched down from modern-day Virginia into Catawba territory, ferrying fur and other goods along the route. In 1700, during his voyage through the area, the English explorer John Lawson noted that he'd never seen the likes of such "extraordinary rich Land....The Savages do, indeed, still possess the Flower of Carolina." That is, until English settlers began to receive huge swaths of land deemed otherwise "un-used" from the king and his colonial cronies. Absentee landowner Henry McCulloh reaped thousands of acres that included the Catawba Trail Farm spread. William Johnston—whose grave site in the farm's woods is one of Durham County's oldest-known resting places—then acquired the property in 1763. He opened the Little River Store, a place for travelers to buy sundries such as rum and Irish linen, on the Indian trail. After Johnston's death, his partner, Richard Bennehan, opened yet another store and amassed money enough to purchase more land—and more enslaved people to cultivate it.

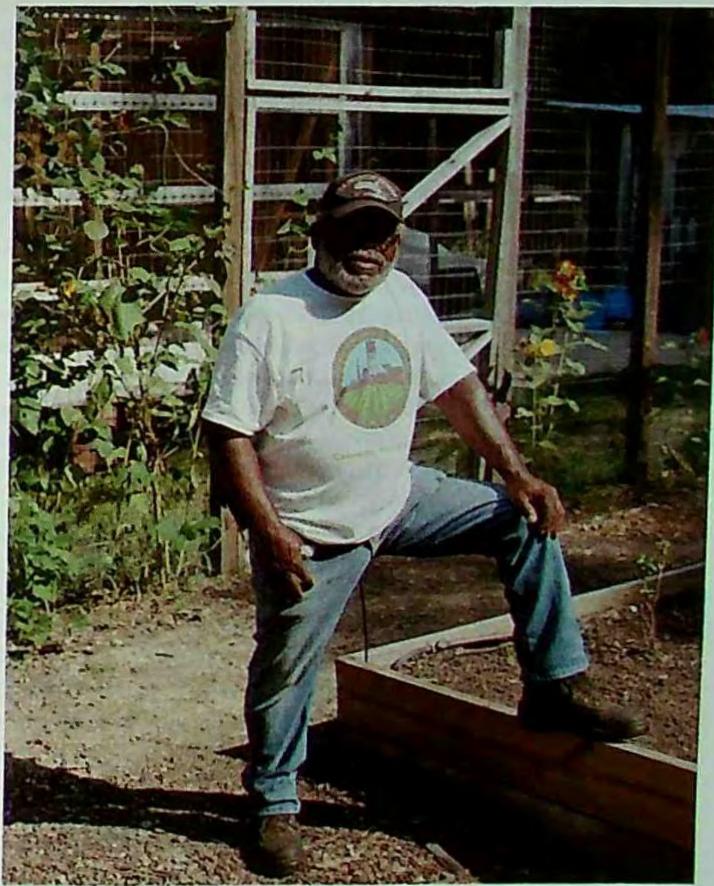
Eventually, Bennehan left the property to his son, Thomas, and his son-in-law, Duncan Cameron, both of whom willed the majority of it to Duncan's son, Paul. By the 1860s, the younger Cameron and his siblings owned some thirty thousand acres in central North Carolina crossing five modern counties. Their holdings comprised four plantations, including Stagville (now a state historic site), and about a thousand enslaved people. Abner Jordan, who was born in Stagville's bustling quarters, remembered that Cameron enslaved so many that he couldn't recognize his own chattel if he met them while out walking his demesne: "When he ased dem who dey wus an' who dey belonged to, dey tell him dey belonged to Marse Paul Cameron an' den he would say dat wus all right for dem to go right on." (Vera Cecelski, Stagville's site manager, says that a wrong or seemingly impudent reply could earn that person a bash on the head, courtesy of Duncan Cameron and his cane.)

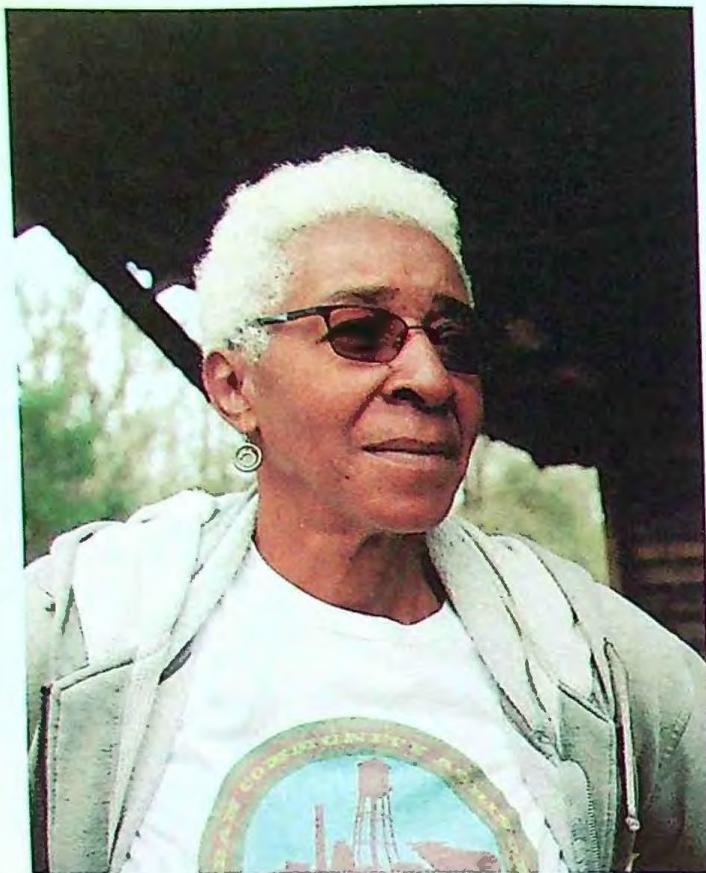
Reconstruction's new order didn't strip the Camerons of their power, much less their land. Even as freedpeople began to depart to try life elsewhere, the family still had their holdings, sway over sharecroppers with generational knowledge of that land, and





Clockwise from top left: Fresh eggs; Catawba gardeners weigh their produce and log the data to help the nonprofit measure impact; a fruited okra plant; community gardener Lilton Evans; blooming okra; a bottle tree, to protect the garden by catching evil spirits, says Sellars, and "another way of sharing Black history."





Sellars; hot peppers in the Catawba garden.

investments in banking and railroads. Only some descendants of the formerly enslaved people that the Camerons had marched in the mid-1840s from North Carolina to the family's Alabama plantation—a money pit with questionable soil—ended up with a share of the clan's real estate. And they had to buy it.

DELPHINE SELLARS AND LUCILLE PATTERSON understand being landless. The sisters grew up outside Washington, North Carolina, two of ten siblings. Rest rarely came to the truck farm where they labored with their single mother, growing huge volumes of crops for local markets. The family weren't sharecroppers per se, but they endured the endless slog of planting, tending, and harvesting the likes of melons, sweet potatoes, and squash over the course of North Carolina's long growing year. When their mother bought a house, they found out later she possessed only a chattel deed to the structure, but not the land on which it sat.

Young Delphine and Lucille Godley craved a future without farming. College. City life. An indoor job. Each wound up in the Triangle; Sellars worked at the local employment office, then became a community outreach worker, and eventually earned a master's in organizational management and became the director of Durham County's extension department. Patterson worked a white-collar corporate job, then transitioned to run a community-center recreation program. Still, gardens sprouted in the sisters' wakes: their

own backyard patches, a church plot with ninety raised beds, at Patterson's community center.

Thanks to Sellars's role at the extension office, Triangle Land Conservancy asked her to serve on its board. As Sellars prepared to rotate off, she shared her hope to create community gardens on a large scale. "I was, like, 'Oh, I'm sure we have property you could put raised beds on,'" recalls Sandy Sweitzer, TLC's executive director, with a laugh. "I had no idea. I knew she had big plans," but she didn't quite understand the breadth of Sellars's vision.

Then Sweitzer thought of Snow Hill. TLC had bought it at a reduced price from a developer, and the trust had plans to safeguard the waterways there that feed Raleigh's municipal water supply and perhaps establish a nature preserve. Formalizing the first agreement that laid out how UCAN could use the property took a while. "We'd never done anything like this before," Sweitzer explains. But the land trust had been paying attention to the way some New England trusts were using a "buy-conserve-sell" model. They'd purchase or otherwise obtain land, keep it for a short time and put easements on the property, and then sell it at below-market prices to young farmers struggling to find affordable property or loans.

TLC was also trying to address its lack of diversity, as well as that of Triangle land ownership. In 2012, the conservancy opened a nature preserve at Horton Grove, adjacent to the Stagville slave quarters, naming trails after the families who lived, loved, and labored there: Holman, Justice, Latta, Sowell, Walker, and others.

The staff didn't reflect the demographics of the six counties the nonprofit serves, so TLC also committed to racial equity training and a strategic plan that aimed for nearly half of its workers to be people of color.

Land conservancies, historically more focused on securing natural resources, haven't always done their best to cultivate relationships with communities of color, says Forrest King-Cortes, the director of community-centered conservation at the Land Trust Alliance, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit that represents some 950 member trusts across the country, including TLC. "We're doing our good conservation work to protect the birds and the bees," he says, "but we haven't talked to anybody across the street."

Those conversations are doubly hard when "we have ignored [a community] for forty years," King-Cortes says—or ignored the dire statistic that Black farmers owned far less land in 2020 than they did in 1920 (and that 96 percent of U.S. farmland owners are white). Violence, lending and government discrimination, encroaching development, complicated inheritance issues, and general attrition have whittled down the numbers, even as land conservancies have blossomed. In North Carolina, about twenty-five land trusts have conserved approximately 400,000 acres of wetlands, forests, and other spaces. By contrast, the 2017 Census of Agriculture shows that farms with a Black principal then amounted to only 170,000 acres across the state.

TLC created an initiative called Good Ground to conserve more farmland while addressing inequity in land distribution, and the transfer of Catawba to UCAN will represent its first triumph. As easements go, it was a fairly complicated deal: The spread was purchased using state water conservation funds, with about 70 percent placed under a more restrictive easement to protect the area's all-important Neuse River watershed. The other fifty-three acres, where Catawba Trail Farm lies, will be placed under a working lands easement to allow agriculture. Part of the property crosses city and county boundaries, adding to the bureaucratic hurdles.

TLC is not the first to try such redistribution, but deals that make land affordable for Black-led nonprofits aren't common. And outside of this model, Black people have historically missed out on the benefits of conservation easements; many land trusts don't even keep racial demographics on the parties involved, as they're overwhelmingly white.

Levi Van Sant, a George Mason University human geographer, along with colleagues from the Universities of Georgia and South Carolina, has analyzed private easements in the Lowcountry to understand how they might impact environmental justice. Van Sant and his research partners found large concentrations of Black residents near private conservation easements. While easement neighbors can benefit from pristine natural resources, easements can also push development to these adjacent communities.

Black communities also rarely have the financial wherewithal and legal access needed to obtain conservation easements themselves, says Lillian "Ebonie" Alexander, the director of the Raleigh-based Black Family Land Trust (BFLT), one of the nation's few trusts dedicated to preserving land owned by Black and other historically underserved people. "Nobody talks about easements to Black people," Alexander says, partly because Black farms are often deemed too small to attract land trusts that want to nail down big swaths of territory. Trusts, Alexander says, "want to preserve hundreds of acres. Not five or twenty." And it's expen-

sive work. She's seen single acres in nearby Wake County go for \$100,000. But she's committed to helping Black Americans retain their land. Her organization's working philosophy, called a "land ethic" after the doctrine of the Wisconsin conservationist Aldo Leopold, acknowledges the many meanings land holds for a people once condemned to work it under bondage. For the BFLT—and at Catawba—land isn't just a source of the compounded traumas of slavery, sharecropping, migration, and food insecurity for Black Americans. It's also a wellspring of pride, knowledge, economic power, and spiritual connection.

CATAWBA TRAIL FARM HAS ITS OWN LAND ETHIC BASED on collaborative work, intergenerational learning, and the idea that having food is an inalienable human right. People who rent raised beds there, including me, volunteer a couple of hours a month of general farm labor, such as helping harvest vegetables for the farm's free food distribution. On Saturday open workdays, they grow community along with herbs and flowers.

At a chilly mushroom inoculation workshop this past winter, twenty participants formed an assembly line to lift and drill logs from the farm's forest, stuffing the holes with spawn from oyster and lion's mane varieties. The thirty-one-year-old creative director and curator Khayla Deans showed up ready in her puffy coat. In October 2021, she attended her first weekend workday at Catawba after seeing an online call for volunteers. "I just knew I needed to get my hands in the dirt," she says, an opportunity she didn't have while growing up in Philadelphia or now as an apartment dweller.

Minutes after she arrived, she recalls, an expert gardener named Lilton Evans—only ever referred to as Mr. Evans—exclaimed, "You're new." He walked her over to a bed full of garlic chives and asked, "Do you know what this is?" Evans, who is seventy-five and was raised on a farm in Southampton County, Virginia, urged her to smell and taste the fronds. Soon she was planting cucumbers, tomatoes, and yellow squash in her own little rectangle of soil. Afterward, she talked about the experience so much her mother half-jokingly began to call her Farmer Khayla.

From Patterson, Deans gets plainspoken humor and a hearty "welcome home" after a break. Deans then listens to Sellars small-talking the chickens when Sellars hears their egg song and enters the coop. Together, they've ambled through the old trading path, looking at trees and discussing a visitation of hummingbirds.

Each sister teaches in her own way. Diplomatic Sellars is likely to tell a gardener not that they've got the wrong rake, but that there's a better tool. Patterson, a skilled volunteer recruiter with a quick cackle of a laugh, keeps order—she won't hesitate to warn a neglectful gardener that his or her plants need attention. Different though they might be, the sisters both believe they were meant to create Catawba Trail Farm. "Don't you remember our maiden name?" Patterson asks. Godley.

They've received other portents, too. One day, Patterson took a picture of the garden from the millhouse. When she looked at the image, she saw a shadow of a person who wasn't there: what looked to be a woman wearing an old-fashioned long dress, holding a staff or tool. Patterson believes it may have been a spectral visitor, one who might have worked in captivity at Snow Hill. The idea of an otherworldly presence comforts them all. "I think it's a sign," Patterson says, "we're supposed to be here." ☐

GGG_EXCLUSIVE:

The Madcap Kidnappers

ROUSTED FROM HIS HOUSE BY AN AUDACIOUS PAIR OF CRIMINALS AND THEIR KIDS, A WEALTHY BIRMINGHAM BUSINESSMAN GETS TAKEN FOR THE MOST TERRIFYING—AND BEWILDERING—RIDE OF HIS LIFE

By: Charles Gaines

Camera_B1

Illustrations by //::::: EDDIE GUY

>>> 7:00 A.M. TO 10:30 A.M.

A door slams.

A young man, M., has just entered a bedroom of a \$2 million house atop Red Mountain, in Birmingham, Alabama. He stands over the bed where an older man, E., is asleep.

M. (*loudly*): Sir, hello. Why are you in my house, sir?

E. (*still half asleep*): Nahnah...What?

M.: What are you doing here?

E.: You scared me.

M.: What are you doing here, sir? What are you doing here?

E.: Excuse me, what do you mean?

M.: Are you supposed to be here?

E.: Yes, I live here. I rent this house.

M.: No sir, I just bought this house off the market. I bought this house and everything in it two months ago.

E.: Uhh...no you didn't.

M.: Yes sir, I did. I have my whole family here today. I have my whole family here right now. Who are you?

E.: I am Elton Stephens, and I am renting this house.

Elton B. Stephens Jr., to be exact. Seventy-five years old; six feet tall, 180 pounds; gray hair, blue eyes. He is fourteen years retired as manager of the real estate division of EBSCO Industries, Inc., a privately held international conglomerate started by his father. The company's private holders are Elton's family, one of the wealthiest in the South. Elton has been separated from his second wife for a year. And for that year he has, it is true, rented the house in dispute from a friend of his (referred to hereafter as Mr. B.), while his new house is being finished.

By way of full disclosure, I should mention that I have known Elton and his family almost all my life. His siblings—two sisters and an older brother—are private, discreet, Apollonian people, while Elton has always had a Dionysian lean toward partying, fast cars, good food, good wines, and pretty ladies. He has an endearing grin, a Deep South drawl, not a shred of pretense or affectation, and a sweet soul. He also has sleep apnea. Every night when he goes to



bed, he pulls up an app on his phone called SnoreLab that records his snoring and breathing overnight, along with any other sounds made nearby—such as those of the Kafkaesque nightmare he finds himself waking to this morning, a nightmare for which nothing in his blithe seventy-five years has prepared him.

(Note: Despite the fact that it seems like someone *had* to have made it up, the dialogue in this article, up to when Elton leaves the house, is taken directly from the SnoreLab recording, though some of it has been edited for clarity and/or reordered.)

E.: So, what now?

M.: You tell me.

E.: You want me to leave?

M.: I need to see some credentials, 'cause I got mine. I think you are lying to me. Who do you rent it from?

E.: Mr. B. (*another Alabama Croesus, whose name is well known in the state*).

M.: Well, I brought my family here to show them their new home.

E.: Okay. Can we go in the living room?

M.: No, my family is in there.

E.: Buddy, you are scaring me.

M.: I'm not trying to scare you, bud. If I was trying to scare you, I would scare you. I mean, this is just crazy as f**k. I've never done any business with Mr. B. I mean, I've bought high-end cars from him [*not true*], but never any real estate business. I didn't take him as a crook.

E.: So, do you want me to leave? I would like to get in my car and leave, please.

M.: No. We gotta figure out why the hell I'm out a whole house here.

E.: Is this a robbery?

M.: Absolutely not, sir. A robbery? Do I look like a robber?

E.: Yes.

M.: I do?

E.: No! You don't look like a robber. I didn't mean that...Can we go in the living room, please?

M.: Are you going to be copacetic in front of my family? We're going to act real correct in front of my fiancée and her kids, right? If you make them feel out of place or something like that, I will hurt you.

E.: Do what?

M.: 'Cause I have no problem with you meeting my family as long as you act correct. But there is a reason I am here.

E.: Okay. What is it? Money?

At this point, M. picks up Elton's phone from the bedside table and puts it in his pocket, where it continues to record for another two hours, the words a bit muffled, but

audible. Elton gets out of bed in his pajamas, and they go into the living room.

M.: Baby, baby, baby, baby! This is Mr.

Elton. Say hey to Mr. Elton.

T.: Hey. How are you?

is Tabatha Nicole Hodges.

Thirty-one; five foot five, 130 pounds; brown hair; a severe mouth, lynx eyes, a number of traffic violations and an arrest for unlawful manufacture of a controlled substance going back ten years. With her on a sofa in the living room are two children: a boy, thirteen, and a girl, eleven. They all stand and nod at Elton, who says to M., "You have a nice family."

M. is Matthew Amos Burke. Thirty-four; five foot seven, 170 pounds; brown hair, blue eyes. He has a wrestler's neck, beefy tattooed arms, and a put-upon set to his features. He is wearing a turned-around baseball cap, a black shirt with a red horse on it, a white belt on blue jeans worn below the hips, and red tennis shoes. In the past decade, he has been arrested multiple times on charges including unlawful possession of all kinds of drugs, tampering with evidence, resisting arrest, carrying a pistol without a permit, and trafficking methamphetamines—for the last of which he has just completed a three-year jail sentence and is currently out on probation.

Matthew and Tabatha arrived at Mr. B.'s house more than five hours ago, around 2:00 a.m. They forced open a door to let themselves in and liked what they saw. Parked outside in the driveway were Elton's 2012 Toyota Tacoma pickup and two of the seventeen luxury cars he collects: a 1971 Mercedes 280 SL and a 2012 Maserati sedan. So pleased were Matthew and Tabatha with Mr. B.'s home that they took the keys to the Maserati from a kitchen table, drove the forty-five minutes back to their trailer in Remlap, Alabama, woke up the two kids to show them their new car, and brought them back to the house in Elton's Maserati.

After their return to Mr. B.'s house at 7:00 a.m., the family raided the fridge, tried out all the furniture, and admired the floor-to-ceiling windows, the artwork, the classic Triumph motorcycle on show in the living room. They also helped themselves to a number of items belonging to Elton: a camera, some credit and debit cards from his wallet, an Italian shotgun they found in his closet, a derringer and a 1945 long-barrel Smith & Wesson revolver from his bedside table, ten or twelve high-end watches from another of Elton's collections, and a Yeti cooler to carry all the loot.

You might well be wondering at this point: What did these people think they were *doing*? And the only possible answer is: Who knows? Whatever it was, it might have been influenced by one of several illegal substances in which they were known to indulge. Elton believes that someone must have told Matthew about that splendid house and the elderly renter living in it. That the couple actually thought they could talk their way into taking up residence there seems at the same time wildly improbable and to be the case. Also the case is that they did not know who the elderly renter was, or how deep his pockets were. But they would soon find out.

In the living room, Elton and Matthew continue to debate whose house it is. Matthew asks how much Elton thinks the house is worth. Elton tells him two or three million, and Matthew says yeah, well, he paid two-point-something, he can't remember exactly, for the house and everything in it, and he doesn't like getting ripped off. Elton asks if Matthew wants some money: "Like I could write you a check." Sounding insulted, Matthew says he doesn't want money; what he wants is his *house*.

"This is not a common mix-up, sir," he says.

"Huh?"

"This is not your everyday common mix-up, like you got the wrong luggage or something."

"Look, you can take anything you want," Elton says.

"I don't want to take nothing. It's all mine anyway. I already paid for it."

"You want a car?"

"I don't want a car! I want what I paid for...I just don't know why this is happening to me. I mean, I would do anything for these kids out there, man, and this little lady here. She's had a rough life, man, and I promised them better."

"Well, I can help you out."

"Well, start talking."

"Well, you say you don't want any money..."

"You don't know what I want, buddy."

And it becomes increasingly clear as the conversation continues that neither does Matthew—not exactly, anyway. Elton repeatedly asks to be allowed to put on his clothes and go to the bathroom, and is eventually permitted to do so.

"You wouldn't dare get a gun, would you?" Matthew says. "Don't do that. That wouldn't be safe."

"No, I would never do that."

"Okay. I'm just sayin'."

But what Elton does get from the bathroom is Xanax, and he swallows two of them before he comes out. They come in very handy over the next seven hours.

Back in the living room, Matthew asks if Elton owns any properties. Yes, he is told—a new house in Birmingham into which he is moving in a month, and a five-hundred-acre farm in Bibb County. Matthew and Tabatha show interest in the farm. They question Elton about what it is like and discuss the possibility of Elton's just giving them *that* in place of Mr. B.'s house. But Elton explains to them that deed transfers, etc., will require more time and people involved than they probably...would like.

"Whoo, okay," Matthew says. "So how much money can you transfer to my account? Liquid."

"I don't know how much you want," Elton says. Then, disingenuously, "I don't have a lot of money. What would make you leave me alone?"

"Forever?" Matthew asks. "Or just for today?"

There is no need to report Elton's reply to that. Meanwhile, the kids are starting to become uncomfortable, as in maybe this is *not* their house.

"Are they hungry?" Matthew asks Tabatha.

"Yeah."

"Do you have anything to eat in the kitchen?" he asks Elton.

"Tommy [not his name] isn't going to eat," Tabatha says.

"Why?"

"Because he says he felt funny when he found out this guy lives here. He said, 'Well, I feel funny walking around if it's not our house.' And I said, 'No, it is our house.' But he still won't eat."

Elton says, "I have some chicken salad. You folks want some chicken salad?"

"Hell yeah, I want some chicken salad," Matthew says, and he and Elton go into the kitchen. Digging into the chicken salad, Matthew says, "You got any crackers? Where are your crackers at?" After rummaging around in the cabinets and finding only some disappointing Wheat Thins, he says to Elton, "Have a seat. I don't want you standing up, 'cause you look nervous...You need to make my kids feel comfortable."

"I didn't make them feel uncomfortable."

"They won't even come in here and eat. They said they felt uncomfortable...Where're you going, bub?"

"Just going to sit in the living room," Elton says.

"Don't make me...See, you're getting a little wild right here," Matthew says, following

Elton into the living room. "Whaddya doing, baby?" he asks the little girl. "You hungry? There's some chicken salad in there on the table and some ughh crackers."

The girl: "Mama said that you were gon na try to get that farmhouse he has."

"Yeah, I think we are," Matthew tells her.

Taking another tack, Elton suggests that they all drive down to his bank, where he will write Matthew a check for \$10,000, and then Matthew and his family can go about their business.

"Ten thousand dollars?" Matthew says. "You wouldn't live ten more minutes for \$10,000! And don't look at me like that. It's insulting."

"Well, I'm not trying to insult you."

"Well, you just did, and very blatantly too, sir!"

Now Tabatha comes up and whispers something to Matthew, who turns to Elton and says, "Sir, you might just have to take

doesn't have a clue where—he and Matthew in Matthew's black Chevrolet Tahoe, Tabatha and the kids following them in Elton's pickup—he is understandably sick with fear and determined to try to make no mistakes in attempting to stay on the good side of his, as of now, kidnappers. And but for one large mistake, he succeeds.

Matthew pulls off Highway 280 (the section of which is named for Elton's father) onto University Boulevard, where he is forced to slow in front of a McDonald's.

And Elton tries to jump out of the Tahoe!

But Matthew reaches over one big arm and grabs him by the shirt, tearing off some buttons. Pulling Elton's face into his, a Matthew horrifyingly different than Elton has seen before says, "You do that again, I will kill you and your family."

"I'm sorry," Elton says. "I'm really sorry. But man, you'd do the same thing, wouldn't you?"

YOU MIGHT WELL BE WONDERING AT THIS POINT: WHAT DID THESE PEOPLE THINK THEY WERE DOING? AND THE ONLY POSSIBLE ANSWER IS: WHO KNOWS?

a road trip right here."

Elton: "Do what?"

"You might have to take a road trip right here. I mean, you said when I asked you how much time you have left, you said maybe ten years or so on your life, right? Well, I think you have twenty. And it's all depending on this day here. It's that easy. It's very easy."

"What is that?" Elton says.

"Living. The hard part is dying."

>>> 10:30 A.M. TO 12:00 P.M.

That is indeed the hard part, and Elton wants none of it. Throughout the three and a half hours in Mr. B.'s house, almost two and a half of which were recorded by SnoreLab, he has maintained, presumably with help from the Xanax, an almost preternatural sangfroid in a situation made even more terrifying by being so comically surreal. When they leave the house for he-

Petrified as he is then, Elton becomes even more so when Matthew pulls into a service station and gets out for a quick conversation with some sketchy-looking buddies of his, thinking Matthew might be giving him off to them for...whatever. In such a situation, any small relief feels massive, and so it is for Elton when Matthew gets back into the Tahoe. So relieved is he, in fact, that when they pull off next at Full Moon Bar-B-Que for an early lunch from the drive-through, Elton grabs the tab.

Repeatedly, before lunch and after, when Matthew drives north out of Birmingham on Interstate 65, Elton asks where they are going, and is repeatedly told it doesn't matter; but finally, "To my place." On the drive there from the city, Matthew tells Elton about the three-year jail sentence he has recently finished serving. He says that, in fact, he is just a messenger, that he has a "boss" who is into heroin distribution and

sex trafficking. Then he adds, unnervingly, something about duct tape and that if Elton mentions to anyone what is transpiring today, he doesn't want to *know* what that boss will do to him and his family.

When he exits the interstate, Matthew drives out into the countryside of Blount County. Elton tries to keep track of where they are, but there are too many turns onto back roads with no signs. "You might as well forget looking around, bub," Matthew tells him. "No chance in hell you'd find your way back here." Elton notices a church called Grace Community, and when Matthew finally turns into a field with a couple of trailers, he has the presence of mind, despite his fear and the Xanax, to note a white mailbox up the road a piece with the number 3745 on it.

Matthew drives through the field and stops at the second trailer back. He turns off the engine and sits for a moment without speaking. Behind them, Elton can hear Tabatha and the kids getting out of his Toyota. *Please God, please God, please God*, he prays silently. And he repeats that prayer every hour for the rest of the day.

"Home sweet home," Matthew finally says.

>>> 12:00 P.M. TO 3:30 P.M.

The trailer is in Remlap, population 2,464, its name the backward spelling of Palmer, a family who lives there. Elton has never been to Remlap before. Nor does he ever wish to return.

Inside the trailer, Tabatha and Matthew lead him into their bedroom, where an air conditioner is cranked up as far as it will go, and bras hang from the light fixtures. The three of them sit on the unmade, sheetless bed. Matthew lights up a joint, then gets down to business.

"So, tell me the truth now, bub. How much money can you get your hands on, say wire into our account today?"

And Elton does tell him the truth. "Five hundred thousand dollars," he says.

Matthew and Tabatha stare at him for a moment, then Matthew says, "Okay...We want half of it."

"Fine," Elton says. "But I'm cold in here. Can we go somewhere else to talk about it?"

"You bet," Matthew says, and leads Elton through the trailer, where the kids are playing a video game, to a small deck facing the rear of the field—without another human being in sight. The only seating on the deck is an old wheelchair, to which Matthew motions Elton, then takes his seat on a truck tire.

Matthew offers Elton a joint, which El-

ton declines, and they discuss the best way for Elton's money to become Matthew's. After a few minutes, Tabatha joins them, and she has showered and dressed for the occasion: wet hair slicked back, wearing white jeans and a blue halter top. She sits on a stool she has brought from the kitchen and says, "So, where're we at?"

Matthew tells her that Elton will call his banker and explain that he is buying a farm property from Tabatha, and needs the banker to transfer the purchase price of \$250,000 into her account ASAP. Tabatha asks how long that will take and Elton says he doesn't know, but probably not very long.

"Let's do it!" she says.

Matthew still has Elton's phone, and Tabatha tells Elton to use hers to call the banker. She gives him her account and routing numbers, and Elton makes the call on speakerphone as directed. The banker tells him he will send the request to the wiring department and that someone will call Elton back in an hour or so, maybe more, once the transfer is completed. He asks what number he should call. Elton looks at Tabatha, who motions to her phone. "On this number I'm calling you from," he tells the banker.

Here they are now, the three of them, with a deal more or less straight between them for the first time all day. Except for one important detail: "You're going to take me home as soon as the money is in the account, right?" Elton asks, and Matthew says yes, they will take him home then. "Shake on it?" Elton says. And they do.

Would you believe Matthew? Doesn't the situation shout that no, they will *not* take you home—after you have used Tabatha's phone to call the banker and given him Tabatha's account information—but, far more practically, dispose of you in some gruesome way? And wouldn't you wonder if there was anything you could do, here and now, to make that gruesome disposal less likely? I do not believe, nor does Elton, that he was thinking that strategically as they sat on the porch after the call. But I do believe that his body or one of those buried faculties like an id was thinking for him.

The world as experienced by a particular animal, its distinctive perceived universe, is called by ethologists that animal's *umwelt*. It is hard to imagine two men with less similar *umwelts* than Matthew Amos Burke and Elton B. Stephens Jr. But I believe that while on the trailer deck, Elton sensed on some pressing, primordial level that the more he could bond his *umwelt* to Matthew's, the better his chances of survival.

So, over the next two hours, Elton brilliantly directs the conversation into the lingua franca of the Deep South: cars, hunting, and fishing. The three of them sit there talking those subjects from a stool, a wheelchair, and a truck tire as comfortably as three hog farmers at the end of a long workday. Occasionally, the undeniable horror of his situation surfaces in Elton, and once, it takes voice:

"You are not going to sex-traffic me, are you?"

"No. You're too old and ugly," Matthew reassures him.

"Aww, baby," Tabatha says, "he's not that bad."

But otherwise, Elton keeps to his inner script, and to very good effect. "What are y'all going to do with the money?" he asks Tabatha about an hour after the call to the banker. She jumps off the stool, takes back her phone from Elton, and starts thumbing through her photographs.

"Here," she says. "This is our dream house. Now we can buy it for us and the kids."

The photo shows a white two-story, five-bedroom house near Remlap with plenty of land for horses and cows for the kids to enjoy. His old career in real estate kicking in, Elton asks what the owners are asking for it. As it happens, the figure is around \$250,000. And now, says Tabatha, they have it!

No, no, no, Elton tells her: They don't want to pay the full price, or in cash. What they want to do is start with an offer of about \$190,000, then put down 20 percent of whatever figure they get the house for in cash and mortgage the rest. Taking back Tabatha's phone, he does the mortgage calculation for them, coming up with payments of about \$700 a month. This nearly tickles the couple to death.

"It's where we are going to be married," Matthew says. "And you know what? We want you to come to the wedding."

"Yeah," Tabatha says. "We want you to be a pallbearer."

When word finally arrives on Tabatha's speakerphone that the \$250,000 has been transferred to her bank account, she and Matthew, according to Elton, are as happy as kids on Christmas morning.

"Now you're going to take me home and not hurt me, right?" he says to Matthew, and Matthew says yes, as soon as they make one stop. Again, they shake on it.

The stop is at HomeTown Bank in Pinson, to which Matthew drives the Tacoma with Elton riding shotgun and Tabatha in the back. Tabatha walks to the ATM and comes back waving a deposit receipt for

WHEN WORD FINALLY ARRIVES ON TABATHA'S SPEAKERPHONE THAT THE \$250,000 HAS BEEN TRANSFERRED TO HER BANK ACCOUNT, SHE AND MATTHEW, ACCORDING TO ELTON, ARE AS HAPPY AS KIDS ON CHRISTMAS MORNING



Camera_03

\$250,000. Jumping into the back of the Tacoma, she hugs Matthew's neck. "We got our house, baby!"

"Now you're taking me home, right?" Elton says again.

"Right, right," Matthew says and fires up the Toyota.

On the drive back into Birmingham, Elton is more frightened than at any other time during the day. Matthew and Tabatha have the money; how can it possibly benefit them to set free the only person who knows how they got it? It's not until they turn onto the expressway with his father's name on it, headed back toward Mr. B.'s house, that he begins to believe that, unlikely as it seems, they might be doing exactly that. It helps that Matthew mentions, without much heat, that of course he will have to kill Elton and his family if Elton tells the police what happened to him.

>> 3:30 P.M. TO 6:00 P.M.

They arrive at Mr. B.'s house at around 3:45.

Elton gets out of the pickup, as does Matthew.

"We're gonna borrow your truck for a couple of weeks," Matthew says.

"Just keep it," Elton says and starts to walk up the steps to the front door.

"Come here," Matthew says.

Come here? But Elton walks back to the pickup. Matthew hands Elton his phone. Then he gives him a hug. And drives away.

Fairly boiling with adrenaline and relief, Elton lets himself into the house. He sits down on a sofa and takes a few deep breaths. Then he pulls out his phone and stares at it.

If I were writing a fictional screenplay of this story, I would be sorely tempted to end it with a cut away from Elton staring at his phone to this:

Lawn outside a white two-story house near Remlap, Alabama. Day.

A wedding reception is going on. White tents, caterers, a band playing. A festive wedding party of about a hundred people.

ANGLE: The man who is paying for the reception, Elton B. Stephens Jr., rises from his seat at a linen-draped table with Champagne bottles on it, to toast...

ANGLE: the smiling newlyweds across the table from him.

But this is not a movie, and that is not at all what happens. As he stares at his phone, Elton is indeed wondering whether he should call someone—not out of any well-wishing impulses toward his abductors, but because he fears that if he does, his recently bonded kidnapper pal might come back and kill him. Finally, he calls his older brother. No answer. And no answer from either of his sisters. He gets into his Maserati and drives to his brother's house; no one is home. Then he drives to the big house on a hill that used to be his, and now is the home of the wife from whom he is separated and their son.

She is at home, and Elton tells her what has happened to him. From her house he also reaches his brother and one of his sisters, telling them both that he is not at all sure about bringing the police into this; in fact, the more he thinks about it, the more he leans against it. But by now it is too big a ball to keep from rolling. Immediately after getting off the phone with Elton, his sister calls Ashley Curry, a retired FBI agent who had also worked for the family business. Curry tells her that of course the police and the FBI must be notified and that he will do it.

But, says the sister, they told Elton they would kill him if you do that.

"Oh, they all say that," Curry says.

Shortly after 6:00 p.m., to Elton's surprise and consternation, the driveway outside his estranged wife's house fills with cars from the Mountain Brook and Birmingham police forces and the FBI.

SATURDAY,
SEPTEMBER 12,
2020

By midafternoon the following day, Matthew and Tabatha were under arrest. Using GPS tracking on Elton's phone, the Birmingham police had little trouble locating the trailer in Remlap, and when they showed up there shortly after noon, Matthew and Tabatha were, perhaps unwisely, at home. When she saw the cruis-



ers pull into the field, Tabatha grabbed up all of Elton's watches, guns, credit cards, and the like and started frantically hiding them. But by the time the police entered the trailer, she realized she hadn't needed to do that, since the story she was busy inventing for herself would provide a reason for the stolen goods' presence.

While Matthew was handcuffed and driven back to police headquarters in Birmingham, two detectives stayed at the trailer with Tabatha. One of them, Detective Tamira Butler, told Tabatha she was sending for a warrant to search the trailer. No need to do that, said Tabatha. *I want you to search it so I can show you all the stuff I took from Mr. Stephens.* Detective Butler then announced that she would take Tabatha's statement while she and her partner searched the trailer with Tabatha's consent. Tabatha was only too eager to provide that statement—which can only be admired for its sheer virtuosity of

imagination under pressure, as well as its motive for keeping her fiancé out of jail.

The very short version of Tabatha's long taped statement: She worked a part-time job as a maid (she didn't) and had been sent on three separate occasions to clean Mr. Stephens's rented house (she hadn't). On the second of those occasions, Mr. Stephens had gotten touchy and intimate with her, and during the third, he had forced her into oral sex at gunpoint and then raped her. He hurt me, she told Detective Butler, and I wanted to hurt him back. So yesterday she drove up to the house Mr. Stephens was renting to do just that. But Matthew, who wanted no part of her revenge, had followed her and, in a three-way confrontation with Mr. Stephens, urged her to "let it alone, baby"; they would just take their story to the police.

Panicked by that prospect, her story continued, Mr. Stephens had then given them the guns, watches, camera, credit and debit

cards, Yeti cooler, and yes, the more or less \$5,000 in cash that Detective Butler had just found in the trailer (which Tabatha had actually withdrawn the day before). He had given them all of that, plus his truck, plus the \$250,000 he had wired into her account, to keep them from turning him over to the police. So, she said, Matthew "didn't have nothing to do with it."

One can almost see in the pages of the transcribed tape Detective Butler struggling not to laugh out loud as she asks Tabatha: So, you didn't kidnap him? No, of course not! And he gave you all this stuff? Yes, yes. And your kids were not at his house with you? No, they were here at the trailer with (Tabatha's friend) Taylor. But Taylor says they were not here, they were with you. Well, Taylor is lying....And so on.

In the meantime, at Birmingham police headquarters, Matthew was giving his statement to Cameron Beedle, at the time a Homewood police detective on as-



signment to the Secret Service as a Task Force Officer, and it was very different from Tabatha's. In the transcribed tape of that statement, Matthew insists that he and Tabatha just took an early morning cruise up to Mr. B.'s house to pay a visit to an old friend of Tabatha's, Mr. Stephens, who might have...well, *might* have been her sugar daddy at one time. During their nice friendly visit, Matthew happened to mention a house they had wanted to buy but their loan application had been turned down. And Mr. Stephens said, You know what? I'm just gonna give that house to y'all for y'all's wedding present, and I'll just transfer the money for it into y'all's account.

Then Detective Beedle read Matthew the multiple charges against him, and prepared to drop the hammer.

So, you're saying there was no forced entry, no kidnapping, no theft of property, and no extortion—correct? Correct, Mat-

thew says: none of that. Mr. Stephens was just a real friendly old guy who maybe felt bad about maybe once being Tabatha's sugar daddy and now he wanted to help them out.

"Okay," Detective Beedle says. "Nothing else you want to tell me?"

"No. Everything was authorized by this dude: gifts for the wedding soon to be, and uh, a home for our family."

"Okay," Detective Beedle says. He has something he wants Matthew to listen to.

"You ready?"

"Yeah."

And Detective Beedle plays for Matthew the SnoreLab recording.

EPILOGUE

nd that was that, right? Well, it should have been. But it wasn't.

ANeither of their statements having hauled much water with the police, Tabatha and Matthew were taken into custody that Saturday afternoon and locked up in the Jefferson County jail in Birmingham, with various charges brought against them by the state of Alabama. Since those charges included kidnapping, the FBI was also involved with the case, and a little over a month after their arrests, Matthew and Tabatha were indicted by the Feds.

From here on, Tabatha's route into federal prison was fairly straightforward. But Matthew's, not so much. After his indictment, he was transferred from the Jefferson County facility to a jail in Hoover, Alabama, where federal prisoners are warehoused until their trials. At Matthew's federal court trial in November 2021, he and his court-appointed lawyer agreed to a binding plea bargain, whereby Matthew would accept serving a seventeen-year sentence in the federal prison system in exchange for the dismissal of all state charges against him.

After his sentencing, Matthew was transferred back to the Jefferson County lockup with a federal detainer notice saying, in effect, to the state: Hold this guy until we, the Feds, can lock him up. But somehow that detainer notice got lost in the system. And soon Friday, December 10, 2021—almost a year and three months from the day of his arrest—a Jefferson County sheriff's deputy happened to notice that there were no state charges against this Matthew Amos Burke guy who was somehow in their jail...and set him free!

At large again, Matthew dyed his hair a bizarre shade of blond and quickly learned that very few of his friends and

relatives had much inclination to harbor him. So he bounced around from motel to motel in various suburbs of Birmingham, somehow believing, it would seem, that his best chance for evading the various police forces, the FBI, and the Gulf Coast Regional Fugitive Task Force, all of them looking for him, was to stick around the city where he'd committed his crime.

Needless to say, Elton hoped Matthew had fled to Namibia, but he arranged for round-the-clock security for himself and his wife and son in case he had not.

In the end, none of the abovementioned arms of the law finally located Matthew, but rather a six-foot, 275-pound, bald and bearded born-again private investigator named Odie Oden, who had taken an interest in the case from the beginning. No one had hired Oden to find the fugitive, but he'd decided to do so anyway.

One afternoon, seven days after Matthew's release, Oden got a call from one of his many sources around town, who gave him a phone number. He traced the number to a Chevron station in Alabaster, about thirty minutes south of Birmingham. So he took a drive out there and sat in his car, surveilling the station. After a while, he saw Matthew walk out from behind a dumpster where he was apparently living and go into the station, whose phone he had been using to try to find anyone who might help him out. Oden called the Alabaster police, and within minutes twelve officers showed up with shotguns, trapping Matthew inside the Chevron.

He was said to have given up calmly. And, I'm betting, with a measure of relief.

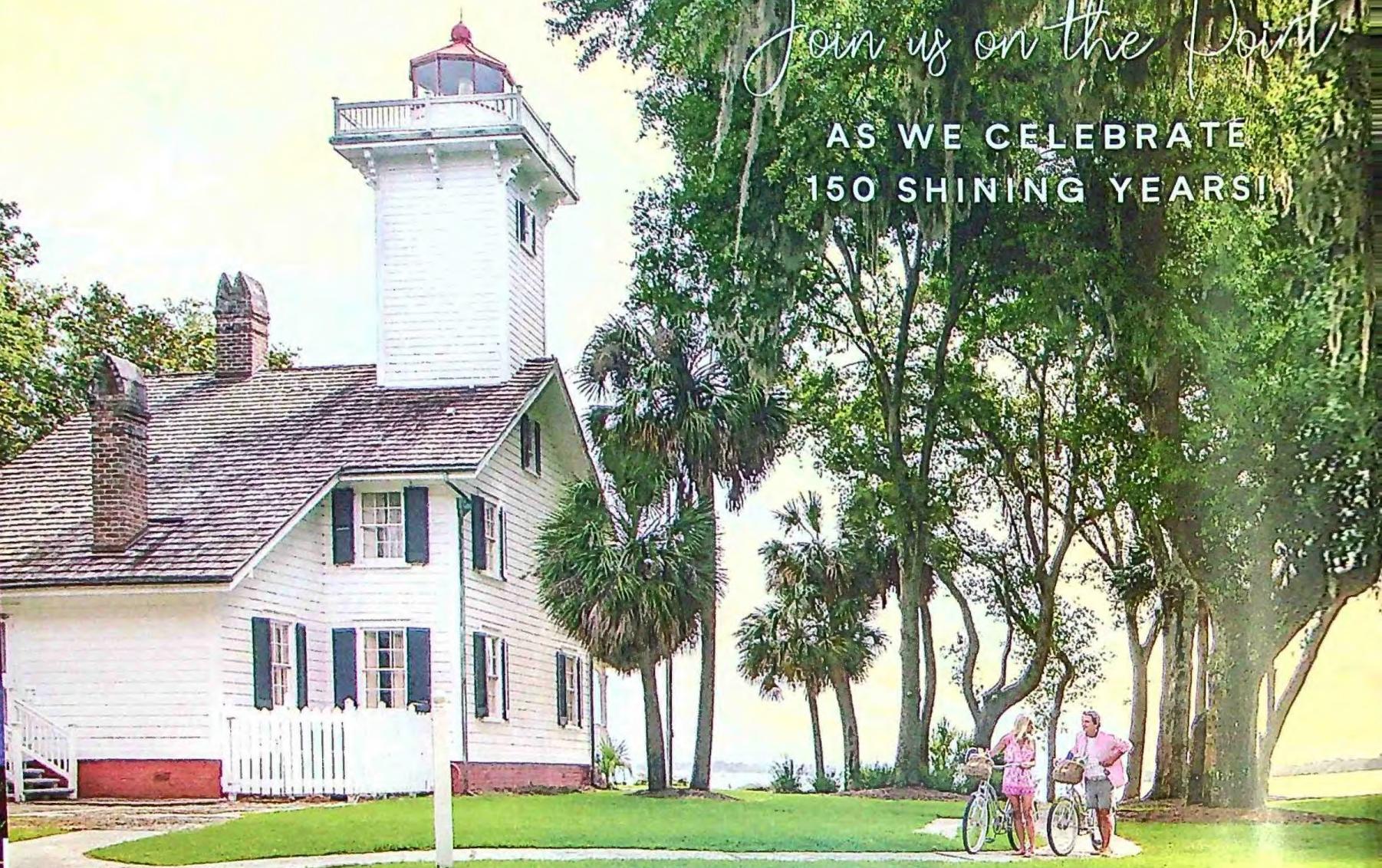
Matthew Amos Burke is currently serving seventeen years at a federal correctional institute in Manchester, Kentucky, on charges of kidnapping, bank fraud, and attempt and conspiracy to commit the offense of bank fraud.

On the same charges, Tabatha Nicole Hodges is serving twelve years at a women's federal correctional institute in Aliceville, Alabama. In her original plea, she stated that the kidnapping was all her idea and that Matthew had nothing to do with it. Later, she recanted that plea.

Elton Stephens's attorney throughout all the above is a smilingly sardonic, seen-it-all, seventy-one-year-old criminal defense lawyer named Tommy Spina, who has defended every imaginable type of criminal for forty-five years all over the country. In one of my many conversations with him while reporting this story, Spina summed it up as well as anyone: "You've heard of blue-collar crime and white-collar crime. Well, this was no-collar crime." ☐

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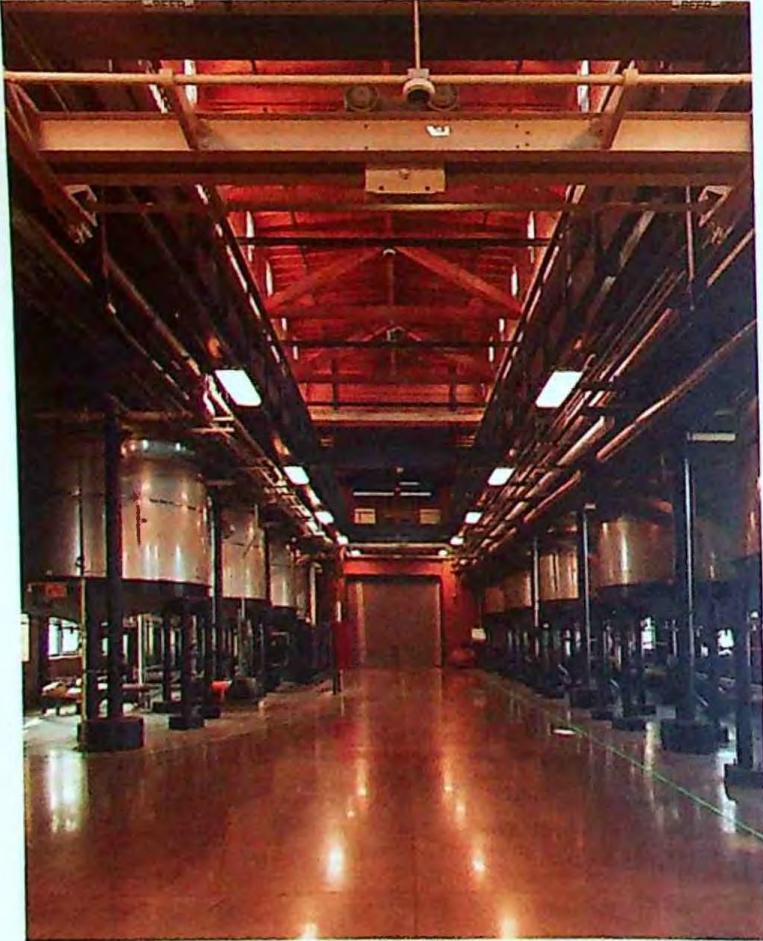


WEEKENDS

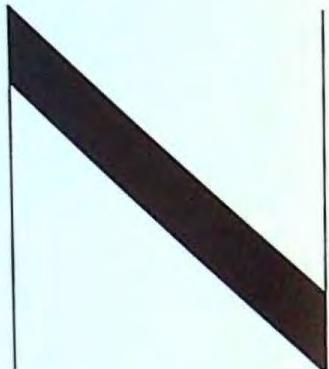
Derby City Revival

AS THE BOURBON BOOM SURGES
ON, LOUISVILLE BUZZES WITH NEW ENERGY

By Tom Wilmes



The Barbaro memorial statue at the Kentucky Derby Museum; inside Angel's Envy. Previous page: Clayton & Crume's flagship store on South Shelby Street.

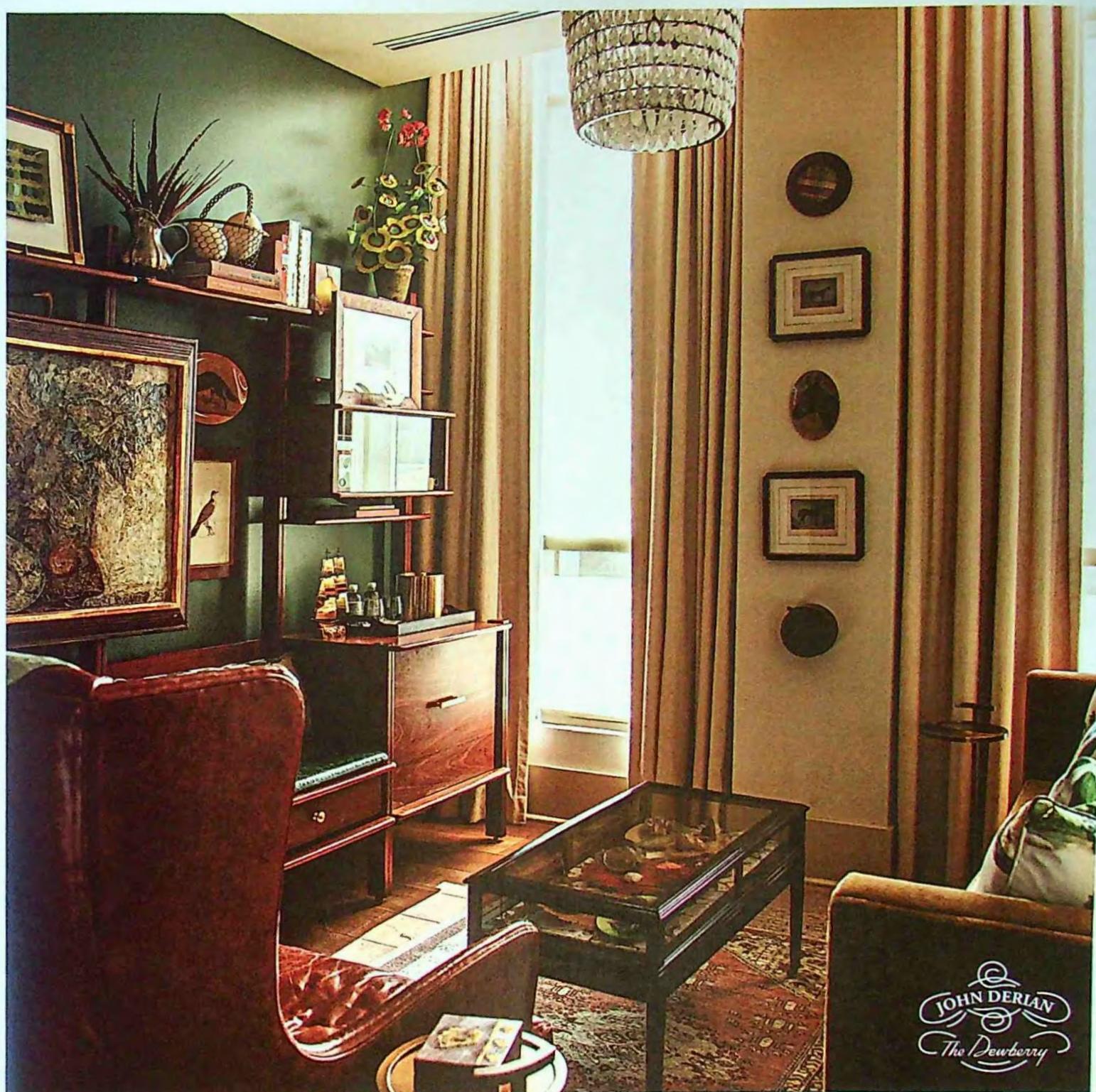


Nearly 170,000 guests will fill Louisville's Churchill Downs on the first Saturday in May for the 149th running of the Kentucky Derby. Yes, it is America's oldest continuously held major sporting event, and a bucket-list experience for many. But before and after the stands brim with outrageous fascinators and fedoras, you're likely to spot hard hats as the facility undergoes an estimated \$320 million upgrade through next year. The project is adding upscale seating and hospitality areas, including the Homestretch Club, which debuted last year, and covered grandstands at the first turn. The paddock—where grooms saddle horses before each race—will feature a green space for more spectators and a perfectly framed view of Churchill Downs' iconic twin spires.

Beyond the track, Kentucky's largest city is experiencing a similar rebirth, with pilgrimage-worthy cocktail lounges and distilleries opening at a steady clip. (More than a hundred new restaurants and bars launched in 2022, reports the *Louisville Courier Journal*, along with some twenty hotels in the past two years.) "I credit bourbon," says chef Edward Lee, who moved to Louisville from New York City in the early 2000s to stake his culinary claim with the lauded fine-dining restaurant 610 Magnolia. Lee is opening a new restaurant this spring that melds Southern sensibilities with his Korean roots. "As the bourbon explosion has happened," he says, "there has been an explosion of tourism in Louisville that's unlike anything I've seen."

Kentucky has long enjoyed its tie to America's native spirit, but the concentra-

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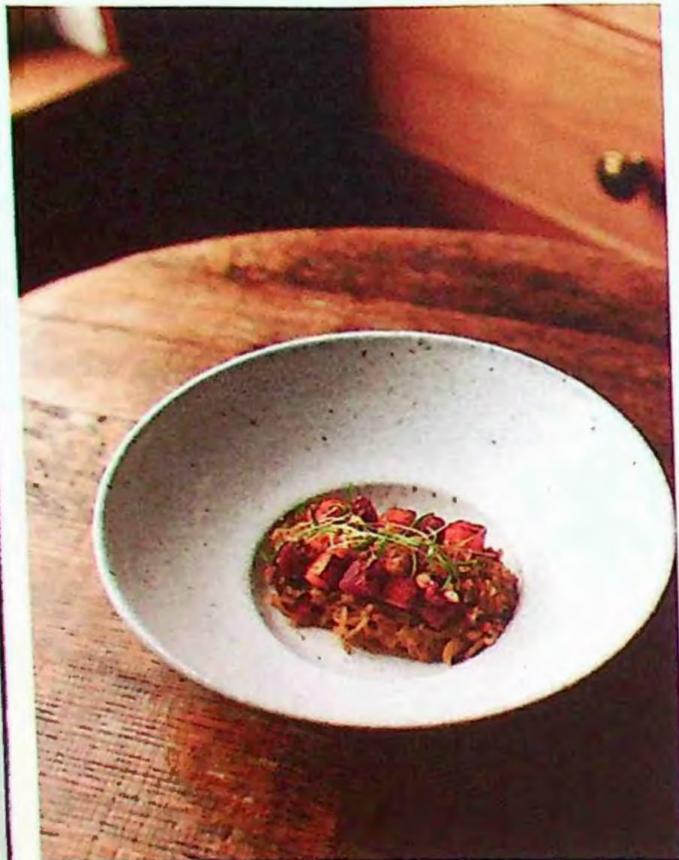


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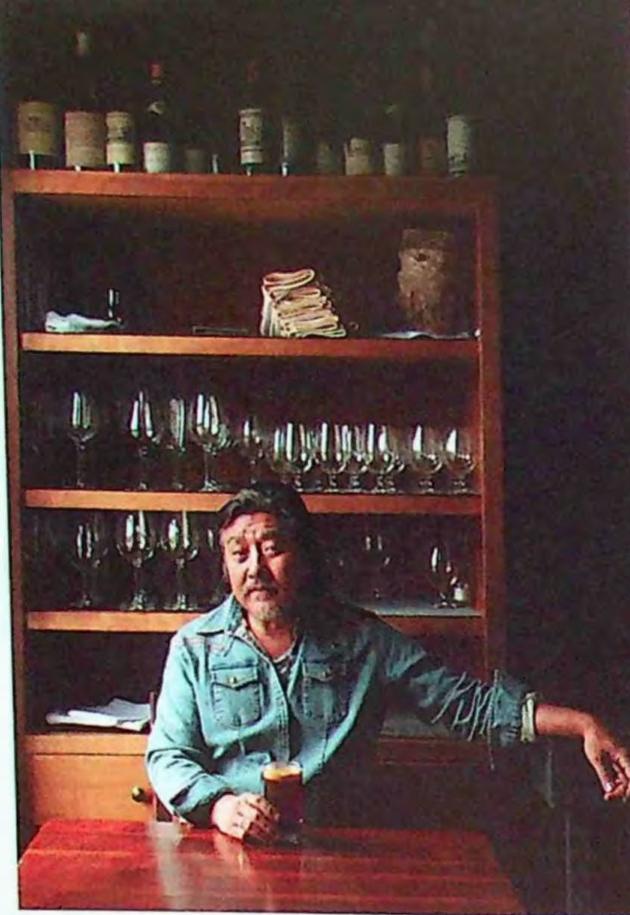
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tion of bourbon-related attractions downtown is a modern phenomenon. The Evan Williams Bourbon Experience opened in 2013, followed over the next two years by Copper & Kings brandy distillery and Kentucky Peerless Distilling Co. In 2016, Angel's Envy became the first full-production whiskey distillery downtown since Prohibition. And the hits keep coming, with tasting rooms set to open for Buzzard's Roost, Bardstown Bourbon Company, and Brough Brothers, Kentucky's first licensed African American-owned distillery.

The fresh spin on tradition carries over into modern hotels tucked into century-



From left: Capellini with duck ragù at 610 Magnolia; chef Edward Lee; popcorn arrives in a julep cup at the Garden & Gun Club.

old buildings, shops that re-envision dusty spaces, and institutions like the Kentucky Derby Museum going high-tech to tell the story of America's favorite racehorse, Secretariat. Even the legendary Stitzel-Weller Distillery, a few miles west of Churchill Downs, has a renewed purpose as the brand home of Blade and Bow (and this publication's own Garden & Gun Club, which serves light bites like pimento cheese and spicy boiled peanuts alongside neat pours and old-fashioned s).

"There's a lot of excitement about the future of the bourbon industry and what that means as an economic driver and Louisville becoming a major tourist destination," says Mayor Craig Greenberg, who took office at the beginning of the year and is the former CEO of 21c Museum Hotels. But the city's history paved the way. "We're going to invest in things that are unique

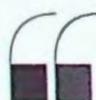
and authentic to Louisville."

Whether you're coming to town for horse racing, restaurant hopping, bourbon tasting, or all of the above, you can't go wrong by adding these newcomers to your itinerary.

EAT & DRINK

You might begin, as many visitors do, with a distillery tour. In addition to the aforementioned options, other standouts include Old Forester for a grain-to-glass look at the bourbon production process and Michter's Fort Nelson for its cypress fermentation vats and top-notch cocktail lounge.

Angel's Envy, headquartered in an artfully renovated and repurposed factory on East Main Street across from Louisville Slugger Field, completed an \$8.2 million expansion last year. Those short on time for a full tour can opt for a bottle-your-own experience, or a guided tasting and visit to the Finishing Room bar for seasonal cocktails and a sweeping view of the Ohio River. The company recently hired a new master distiller, Owen Martin, who previously worked at Stranahan's Colorado Whiskey in Denver and moved to Louisville last fall. "I'm very impressed by the sense of history here," he says. "There are so many



Kentucky has long enjoyed its tie to America's native spirit, but the concentration of bourbon-related attractions downtown is a modern phenomenon



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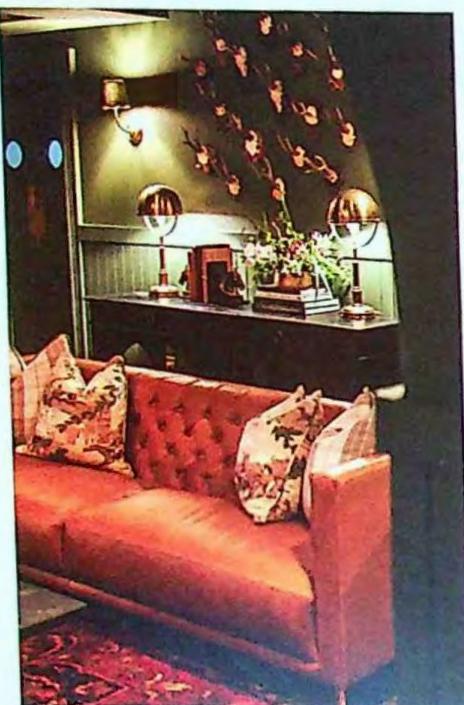
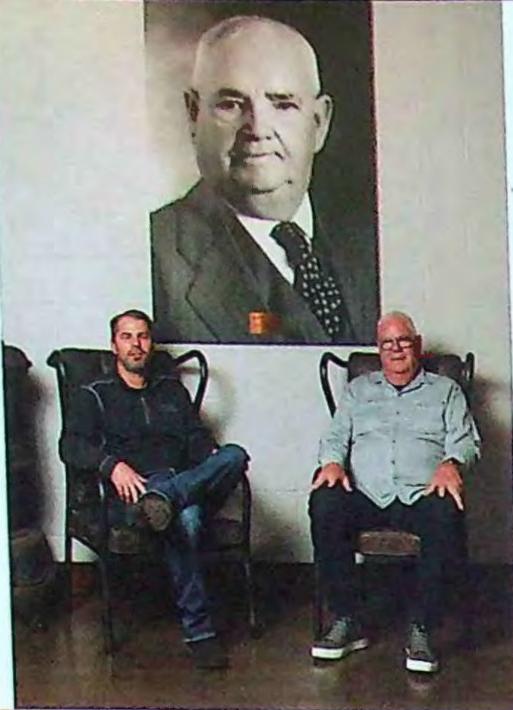
Four Diamond
 Award



The Lodge & Club

Four Diamond
 Award

Clockwise from right: Fourth-generation Kentucky Peerless Distilling Co. owner Corky Taylor (right) and his son Carson sit beneath a portrait of the Peerless founder, Henry Kraver; inside the Garden & Gun Club; a Peerless rickhouse.



historic businesses and areas, and even the newer bars and restaurants have distinct personalities that you don't always get in other cities."

Among those new spots is the charming Epiphany, a farm-to-table cocktail bar and brewery located in a former post office sorting facility in the Highlands neighborhood. Here mixologists work with an ever-changing array of local produce to craft drinks like the Farmer's Tan, a gin martini

ni riff made with brined and pickled baby green tomato "olives."

Chef Lawrence Weeks brings the Cajun-Creole flavors he learned cooking with his grandmother to the kitchen of North of Bourbon, a Germantown destination both classically minded and inventive (try the shrimp yakamein or a bourbon-based

take on peanuts in Coke). For a deep bourbon dive, it's worth a trip a bit farther afield to the Norton Commons neighborhood for the compendious selection and clubby atmosphere at Watch Hill Proper. If possible, time your visit to correspond with one of chef Michael Crouch's themed pairing dinners, which have included a Seven Deadly Sins menu and an ongoing series with whiskey expert Fred Minnick.

Just east of downtown, a busy stretch of Market Street in the heart of the NuLu neighborhood offers a bevy of eclectic flavors. You can't miss the canary-yellow exterior of La Bodeguita de Mima, which serves some of the tastiest Cuban cuisine (and rum cocktails) in the city. At Lou Lou on Market, a vibrant New Orleans-inspired restaurant one block over, you might hear live jazz seeping from the below-ground lounge over plates of shrimp and grits and Cajun-spiced rib eye. Cross the street to Gertie's Whiskey Bar, in the NuLu Marketplace, for an after-dinner cocktail such as the Nouveau Carré, made with rye, apple brandy, allspice dram, and house-made sweet vermouth. Visit on a weekend evening, and the host may buzz you into the subterranean speakeasy.

On East Main Street, Edward Lee will soon open Nami, his contemporary Korean steak house, with traditional grill tables and a private karaoke room on the second floor. Lee says the timing felt right for a city that values authenticity and craves new experiences. "Louisville is a growing city, but it has retained its identity," he says. "And, to me, it still feels like a small town in all the best ways."

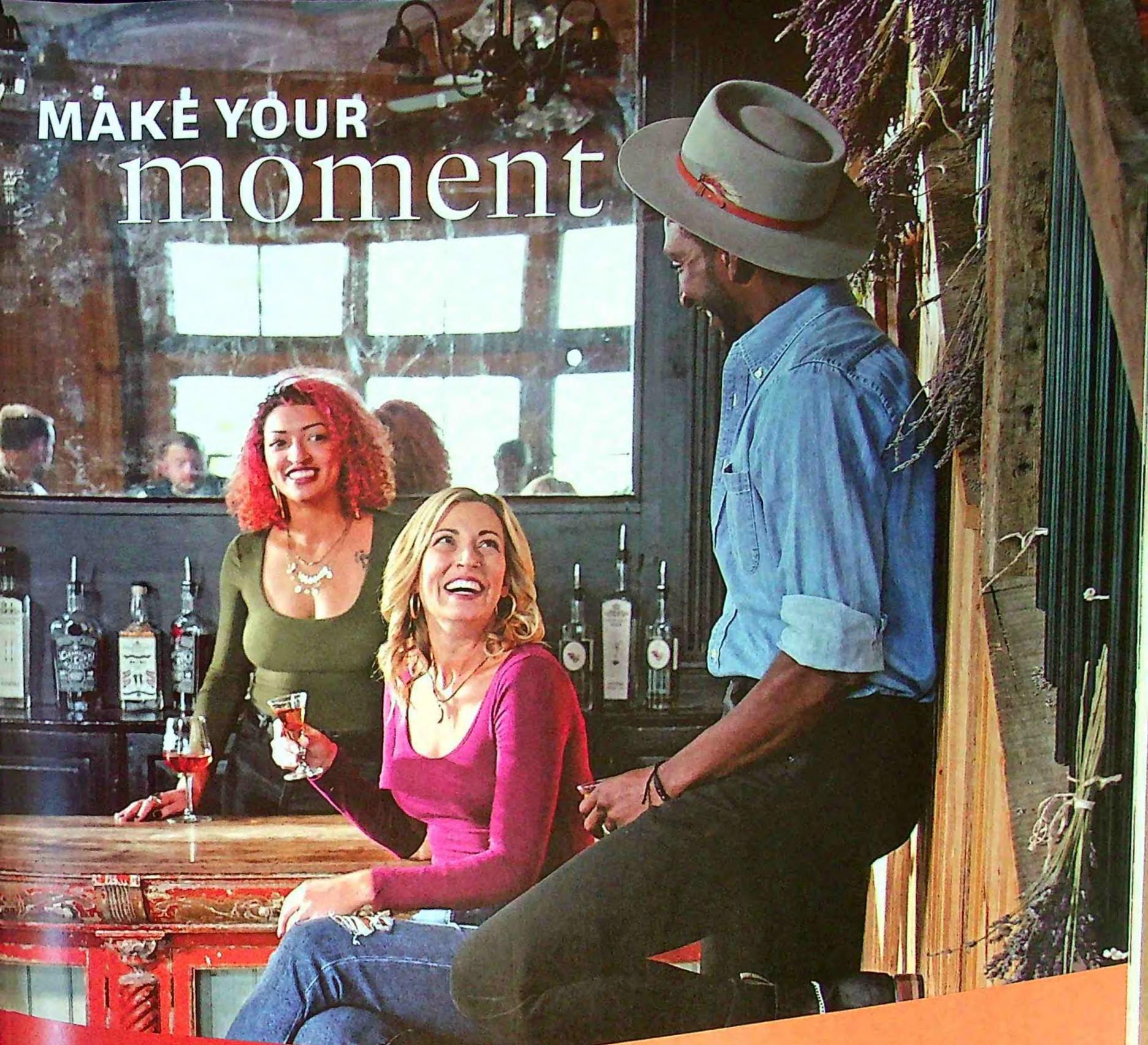
STAY

Opened in 2021, the Grady Hotel sits in an 1880s building on West Main Street that was once home to a medicinal bourbon apothecary and a milliner of fine Derby hats. Today the property sports a refined aesthetic with soaring ceilings paneled in



"Louisville is a growing city, but it has retained its identity. And, to me, it still feels like a small town in all the best ways"

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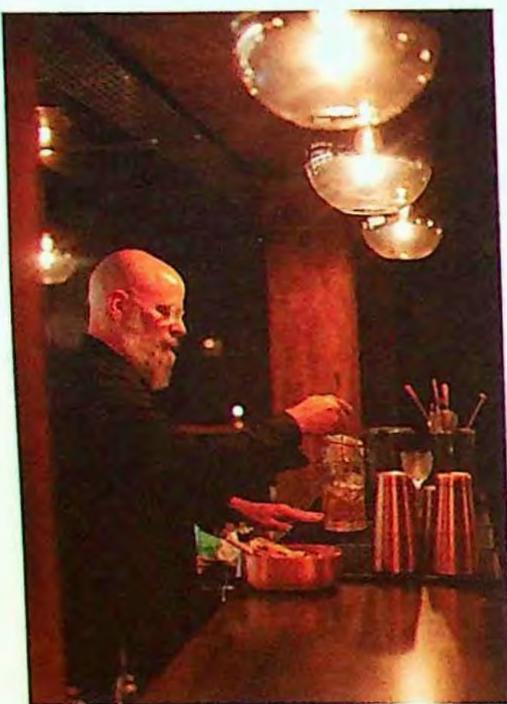
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reclaimed wood, and a speakeasy-style bar and restaurant in the catacombs beneath.

Hotel Genevieve, a six-story, 122-room property set to open in NuLu in time for the Derby, takes its inspiration from the city's namesake, King Louis XVI. A Parisian-style rooftop restaurant and bar offers river views, and the hotel partnered with nearby Rabbit Hole distillery to create a signature single-barrel bourbon.



A short drive away, the historic Highlands neighborhood is home to the Bellwether, located steps from the numerous shops, bars, and restaurants on Bardstown Road. In 2019, Ben Botkins and Sarah Mattingly, along with another couple, purchased neighboring early-twentieth-century buildings—one formerly housed the Highlands police station and the other a BellSouth switching station—and combined them into a twenty-room boutique hotel that showcases the latter's art deco design. "We don't think of ourselves as developers," Botkins says. "We love the neighborhood, love these buildings, and couldn't stand watching them continue to crumble."

SEE & DO

You'll find all kinds of Kentucky lore amid the Frazier History Museum's permanent and rotating installations. One new



Mixing cocktails at Gertie's; the Grady Hotel's lobby.

exhibition digs into the Van Winkle family archives to share a selection of dusty bottles and rare photos. (You can also pop into the adjacent Kentucky Bourbon Trail Welcome Center for trip-planning help and guided bourbon tastings.)

In a building that dates to 1854, Bud Bruner opened a boxing gym where Louisville native Muhammad Ali trained in the 1960s. Today the leather goods company Clayton & Crume puts on workshops and events in the space, and sells a wide variety of handcrafted bags, belts, and wallets in its downstairs shop, alongside an intimate bourbon lounge.

Old Forester's Paristown Hall, the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts' new venue in the Paristown arts and entertainment district, hosts indoor and outdoor concerts and community events. It's the centerpiece of the rapidly developing neighborhood, which also includes the Village Market, Louisville's first collective food hall; the two-hundred-plus-year-old institution Stoneware & Co., with hand-crafted ceramics; and Fleur de Flea Vintage Market, where you can peruse more than a hundred vendors' antique and mid-century modern treasures.

Both Kentucky's horses and its bourbon benefit from the state's abundance of limestone-filtered water and lush land, prime examples of which you can see throughout Louisville's distinctive park system, which was initially designed by Frederick Law Olmsted in the 1890s. An

upcoming project will expand the already popular Waterfront Park and connect it with the Russell neighborhood, a historically Black community devastated by red-lining and urban "renewal" in the 1960s. Efforts are also underway to expand Louisville's trail system to more closely link the city's core with the Ohio River, including the new Waterfront Botanical Gardens, which feature terraced plantings and views of downtown.

Even if your only connection to Louisville has been the televised Kentucky Derby, you know the race reverberates far beyond its famed two minutes. Perhaps no memory in Derby history has captivated the world more than Secretariat's last-to-first performance in 1973. At the Kentucky Derby Museum, which sits alongside Churchill Downs, crews are installing a permanent, immersive exhibit titled *Secretariat: America's Horse* ahead of this year's fiftieth anniversary of the Thoroughbred's historic Triple Crown sweep. The museum, which is open year-round, will also introduce several new tours during Derby season that provide behind-the-scenes access to watch this year's contenders and future hopefuls during morning workouts. You'll see the backside, where more than 1,400 horses and their grooms live and work during the racing season, and stand shoulder-to-shoulder with trainers as Thoroughbreds thunder by at nearly forty miles per hour. It's hard to think of a more authentic Louisville experience. ☐



MAGNOLIA STATE

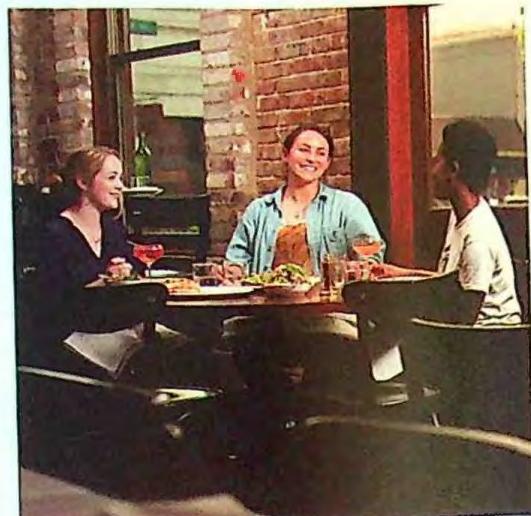
Enchantment

From its blues musicians to the rush of its mighty river, the Magnolia State is the sound of America. It's where this country found its voice and wrote the songs that define generations. It's in every note that echoes in its Red Clay Hills or calls and repeats a warm welcome to "come back soon." It's a chord we can't quit.

It's the siren melody of Mississippi.



Oxford, Mississippi's Square Books is a hub for the South's literati.



MAKING A BREAK FOR *Mississippi*

THERE ARE MORE THAN A FEW REASONS TO PLOT A COURSE FOR INTERSTATE 55 IN SEARCH OF SOUL FOOD, SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY, AND THE SIGNATURE BLUES OF MISSISSIPPI

William Faulkner once said, "To understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi." What did the celebrated Southern writer mean? Look to the Magnolia State's deep well of creative contributors and you'll begin to understand. Between its authors (Tennessee Williams, Shelby Foote, John Grisham) and its artists (B.B. King, Jim Henson, Elvis Presley), some might say there's something in the water of that mighty Mississippi that makes for unique creative spirits unlike those found anywhere else.

It's a quality that's as alive today as it was when Sam Cooke, a Clarksdale, Mississippi, native son, released "You Send Me" in 1957. Or when Sumner, Mississippi-raised photographer William Eggleston produced *The Red Ceiling*, an image that would eventually help earn him the title poet of the American South. You'll find Mississippians' vibrant creativity and curiosity in places like Hattiesburg, where a public art trail features more than forty installations including murals, sculptures, and utility boxes painted by local artists. The city's Pocket Museum is the tiniest art gallery in the state and surprises and amuses visitors and locals alike.

Folklore thrives in Clarksdale, the Birthplace of the Blues, where the myth of Robert Johnson, guitar virtuoso and bluesman, endures. Here he allegedly sold his soul to the devil at a crossroads, and the town celebrated the story with giant guitars at the intersection of Old Highways 61 and 49. Hear the sounds Johnson helped shape at Clarksdale's Ground Zero Blues Club, owned by Mississippi native and movie star Morgan Freeman. Or in the funky, no-frills Red's Blues Club. Find yourself in the Coahoma County seat in April and you'll be right on time

From left: Clarksdale's Ground Zero Blues Club; the Crossroads, site of where bluesman Robert Johnson allegedly sold his soul to the devil; Saint Leo restaurant in Oxford.

for the Juke Joint Festival, featuring one hundred blues acts performing on stages around the town.

Looking for a laid-back Gulf Coast escape? Pass Christian, nicknamed the Pass, boasts some of the softest and cleanest beaches in the state, and a fondness for fine arts. It beckons ten thousand visitors annually for its Art in the Pass Festival each spring. Drawing artists from ten states, the two-day event supports arts education in Harrison and Hancock County schools through scholarships and grant funding. Take in the fest while staying at Hotel Whiskey. A block away and minutes from the beach, the hotel features eleven rooms and Whiskey Prime steakhouse.

The cozy beach community of seven thousand dials up its quirky charm at Cat Island Coffeehouse, named for the nearby Cat Island, a barrier island where, incidentally, no cats live. Rather, French explorers mistook the native raccoons for cats when they discovered the island in 1699. The shop shares space with independent bookstore Pass Christian Books.

A searching, ever-curious perspective permeates this complex and complicated place. Jackson addresses its past at the Museum of Mississippi History and the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum. The former examines collections and artifacts representing fifteen thousand years of history, from prehistoric cultures through the modern era, while the latter focuses on the history of Black people from enslavement through the civil rights era.

From the Tennessee border to the Delta, there's so much to explore in this intriguing, eclectic, ever-evolving region. And at these eight destinations, you'll sense the words of Faulkner at every turn.

To start planning your trip, visit VisitMississippi.org

📍 COLUMBUS

History buffs, foodies, and outdoor enthusiasts have all discovered why Columbus is truly the city that has it all. With over 650 National Register properties in three historic districts, the spot entices visitors to tour well-preserved homes year-round. The Tennessee Williams House Museum and Welcome Center invites guests to the birthplace of America's most prolific playwright. Enjoy Southern cuisine in one of the city's 135 restaurants. Sporting opportunities abound in the beautiful prairie land and the 9,000-acre Columbus Lake on the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway. No matter how diverse the interests of your group, Columbus delivers.

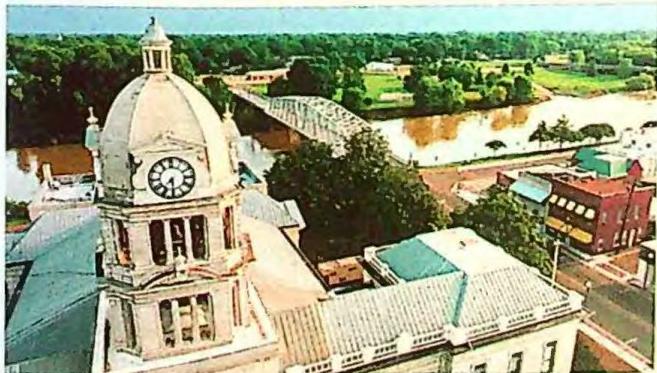
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📍 GREENWOOD

Looking for an authentically Mississippi event that pairs great smoked meats with rocking music? Head to Greenwood this April 28 and 29 for Que on the Yazoo. Sanctioned by the Memphis Barbecue Network, the competition will hand out prizes for best whole hog, pulled pork, ribs, and all the fixins while R&B, blues, and Americana bands provide the soundtrack for the day. Foodies would be smart to stick around after the event has wrapped to catch a class at Greenwood's Viking Cooking School at the Alluvian Hotel. And if you stay, don't miss the Alluvian Spa, known for its therapeutic services. Or rough it in a Tallahatchie Flats historic tenant house for a one-of-a-kind Delta experience you won't find anywhere else.

VISITGREENWOOD.COM



📍 CORINTH

Corinth is often recognized as an important site in the civil rights movement. It was here in 1862 that six-thousand enslaved people took their first steps of freedom at the Contraband Camp following the Emancipation Proclamation. Visitors can learn about their remarkable journey at the Corinth Civil War Interpretive Center, which explains Corinth's critical role as a Union siege site in May 1862. For more history, consider a visit to the nearby Shiloh National Military Park. A visit to historic Corinth would not be complete without a stop at Borroum's Drug Store for a slugburger. Named for the original price—a nickel, which, during the Depression era, was called a slug—the hearty burgers are made from meat and potato flakes, a completely original Mississippi delicacy.

CORINTH.NET



📍 MERIDIAN

The birthplace of the Father of Country Music, Jimmie Rodgers, Meridian, Mississippi, lives up to its legacy as the state's oldest live music scene. This year marks the seventieth anniversary of his eponymous music festival which culminates with a weeklong celebration of performances and events starting May 6. Other standout activities for live entertainment include the spring Full Moon on Fifth concert series, and the Threefoot Arts Festival, a free celebration of the arts held April 21–22. The caliber of live music and arts in this easily walkable downtown is rivaled only by the historic architecture. With two theaters, a 1920s bank turned brewery, and a fifteen-story art deco hotel, downtown Meridian is an idyllic getaway for any arts and culture enthusiast.

VISITMERIDIAN.COM



OXFORD

Called America's Best College Town, Oxford, Mississippi, has an American appeal unlike any other Southern small town. But it's not limited to game-day energy. It's also a culture capital, which has earned it a second nickname, the Cultural Mecca of the South. That's largely thanks to the writers and culinary greats who have called it home. Numerous James Beard Award winners and a literary legacy that includes William Faulkner, John Grisham, Jesmyn Ward, Barry Hannah, Willie Morris, and Larry Brown make Oxford appeal to deep thinkers. Whether you're a leisure lover, arts enthusiast, storied soul, foodie, or a mixture of it all, your perfect getaway awaits in Oxford.

VISITOXFORDMS.COM



TUPELO

It's no secret that Tupelo was the home of the King of Rock and Roll, Elvis Presley. What you might not know is that this charming town is known today for its emerging dining and shopping scene housed in three distinct districts. Get a taste on the new Cocktail Trail, with eight places to imbibe downtown. And while you're sipping, note that spring brings the festival season to the city, with classic cars taking center stage during the annual Blue Suede Cruise, May 5–7. The Gumtree Art & Wine Festival takes place May 12–14, and the ultimate celebration of all things Elvis is June 7–11 during the Tupelo Elvis Festival. If your blue suede shoes are still itching to dance, visit Blue Canoe, a juke joint known for original acts and one of the best beer selections in North Mississippi.

TUPELO.NET



RIDGELAND

Ridgeland is an outdoor oasis. Situated on the banks of the expansive 33,000-acre Ross Barnett Reservoir, it beckons visitors to take full advantage of Mother Nature just off the Natchez Trace Parkway. Make yourself at home in one of seventeen hotels and indulge at more than 150 restaurants for a classic Southern small-town experience with big-city vibes. Visit the Barnett Reservoir, known locally as the Rez, for an abundance of outdoor activities, including pontoons and paddling sports. Or take full advantage of spring's festival lineup with three fests on one weekend in May: the Ridgeland Fine Arts Festival, the MIND Center Santé South Food & Wine Festival, and the Natchez Trace Century Ride.

VISITRIDGELAND.COM



VICKSBURG

Architecture buffs, take note: Vicksburg has more than eleven expertly preserved Greek Revival, Italianate, and Victorian homes open to the public for tours throughout the year. When you're done gathering interior design inspiration, turn your attention to the city's vast historic sites like the Vicksburg National Military Park, which interprets one of the Civil War's most pivotal campaigns.

Six additional museums allow visitors to better understand Vicksburg's past, including the Jesse Brent Lower Mississippi River Museum, which explores the Mississippi River's influence on the waterfront community. Explore the river yourself by making time for a Quapaw Canoe trip or by casting a line with one of Vicksburg's angler outfitters!

VISITVICKSBURG.COM



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Sunrise at Kim Hallin's farm in Ravenel, South Carolina.

OUR KIND OF PLACE

Pastoral Presence

AT A SOUTH CAROLINA FARM, HORSES AND HUMANS HEAL TOGETHER

By Ashleigh Bell Pedersen

On a cool day in the South Carolina Low-country, I found myself standing in a small pasture, surrounded by three horses, two women, and a potbellied pig named Bart.

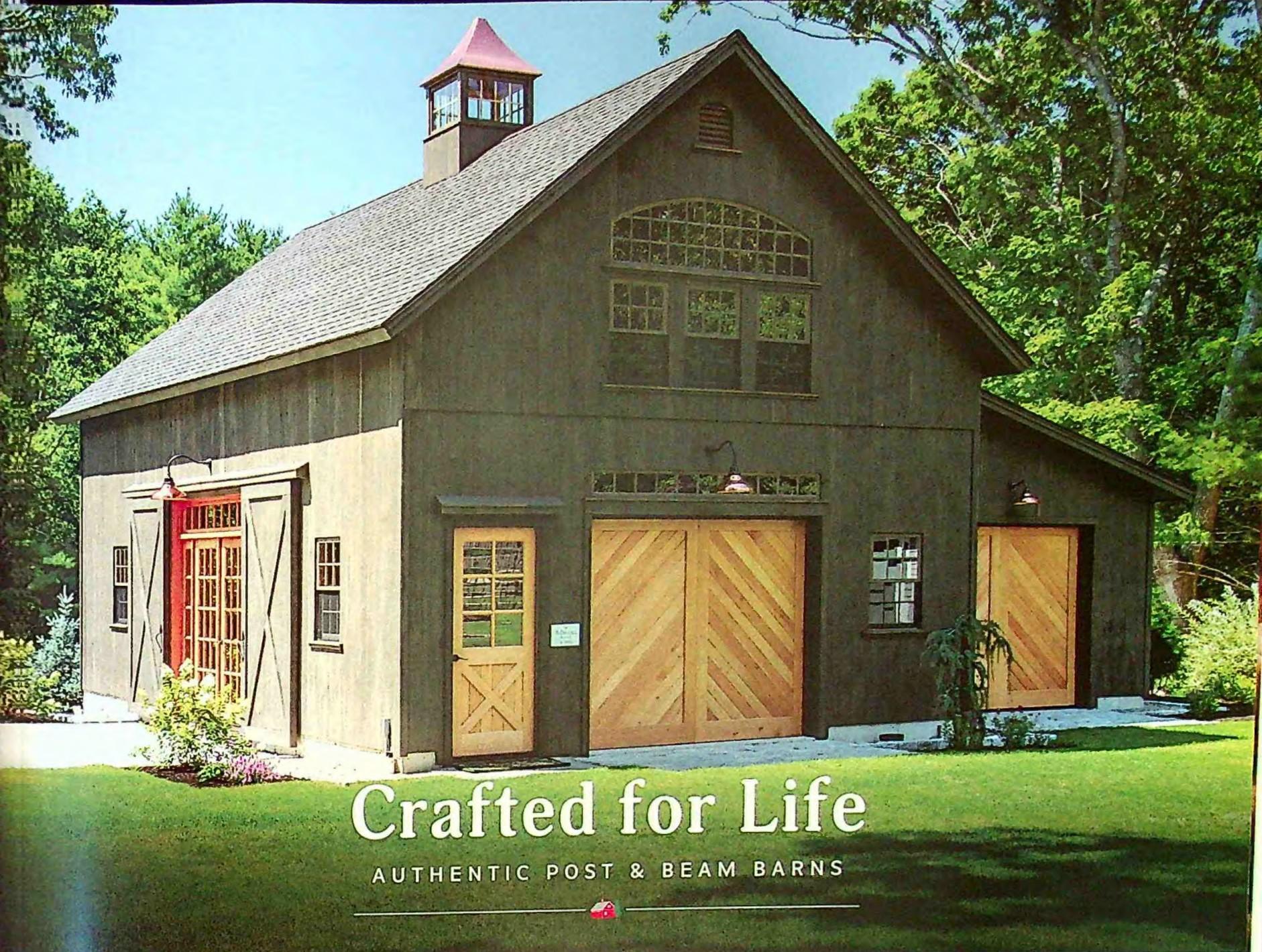
The horse closest to me was Relicario, a solitary gelding unrelated to a mother-daughter pair nearby. His burnt umber coat gleamed in the late morning sun, and a shaggy mane fell over his eyes as he grazed. I positioned my body parallel to Reli's, both of us facing south. When he stepped forward, I stepped forward, too. For several minutes, we moved in quiet alignment. Nearby, my mom was doing the same odd dance with a mare.

At the time, I was only a few months out of well over a year of cancer treatments. While my hair had been growing back for a while, my eyelashes had barely re-

turned at all, and radiation had thickened my scars from the previous year's surgery. At night, I still often awoke to blasts of nerve pain on that side of my body.

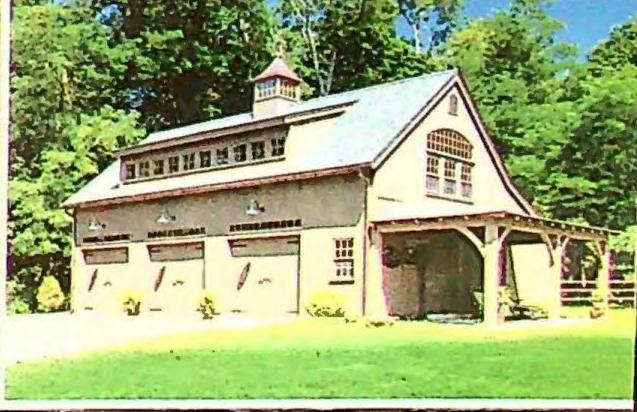
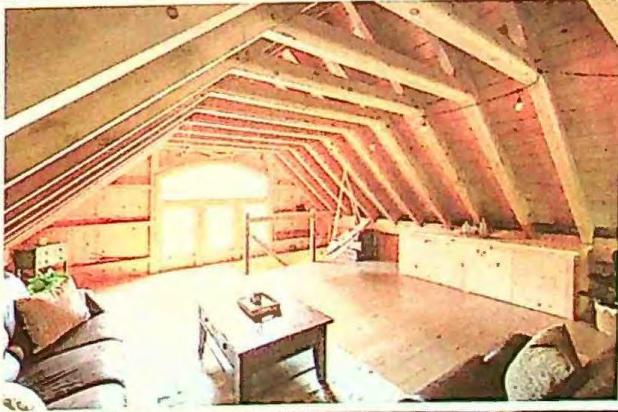
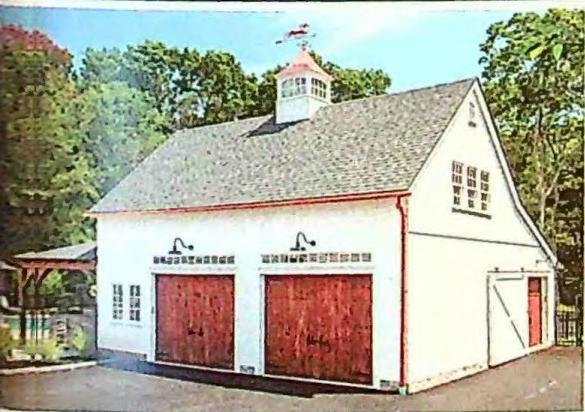
When I was diagnosed in Austin, Texas, the city was one day into pandemic lockdown. I was single, and my family was back in my home state of Virginia. Several times throughout the first grueling months of treatment, my mom made plans to visit, then canceled her flight when my doctor reminded me that my immune system couldn't risk visitors. In the blazing heat of a Texas summer, with rigid pandemic protocols in place, I underwent biopsies, chemotherapy infusions, surgeries, and countless other appointments on my own.

By the time I joined my family for vacation on South Carolina's Kiawah Island in the fall of 2021, I was only barely beginning to see the trauma I'd experienced, and to know myself in its wake.



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BARN TOUR

Relicario, a gelding, peers over the fence.

One morning, my mom and I headed to Ravenel, a small town just inland of Charleston, where a distant relative whom neither of us had met before, Kim Hallin, runs a business called Unbridled on her horse farm. As we drove along flat, sun-bleached roads, I hoped the day would offer me some form of reconnection—though I couldn't fully understand to what, exactly, I was longing to reconnect.

The farm is small and unassuming, a one-story clapboard house set back from the road behind the fenced-in pasture. There, Kim provides customized experiential learning programs and day retreats for individuals, couples, families, and small groups, with a focus on reconnecting to nature. "What I offer," she told me, "is the opportunity to remember what being alive is like for the rest of life on Earth, and to know that this way of experiencing life is available to us, too. Animals and the rest of the natural world can help us remember—help us reconnect with the wisdom within our own bodies."

The horses had watched as we rolled down the grassy drive. One tossed her head in agitation. "Like most of us humans," Kim later said, "they've each had their own traumas."

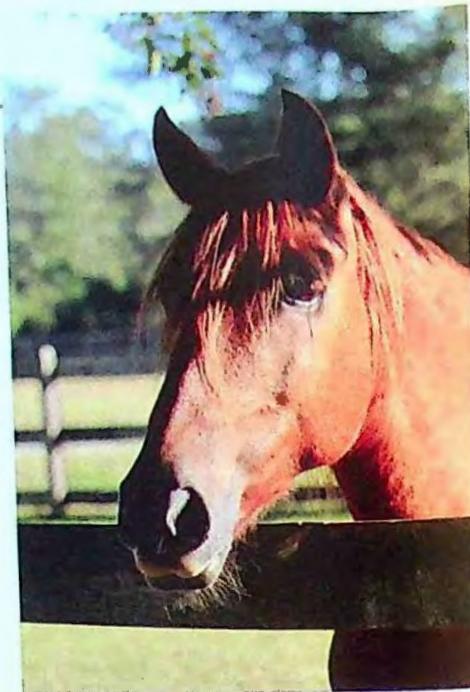
It's easy to see why horses with traumatic pasts, whether they survived severe illness, injuries, prolonged bouts of isolation, or previous owners who relied on negative reinforcement, have found trust in Kim. With kind eyes and a warm smile, she has the sort of grounded presence that makes healing—a process inherently tender and vulnerable—seem possible.

Since my own healing began, I had longed to express my experience through conversation or writing. Cancer, however, was so recent and so overwhelming that I couldn't find the words. At the same time, the parts of my experience that I could articulate, I didn't necessarily want to share. When my mom, a former ICU nurse, asked me about the treatment's effects on my body, I turned reticent. Cancer had blown apart my sense of bodily autonomy, and I didn't want to give away more than I already had. In many ways, I was terrified of anything to do with my body at all.

Under a bright, cerulean sky, Kim pointed out how the horses relied heavily on their senses—feeling flies on their backs and flicking them off with their tails or lifting their heads to watch a car pass. By observing them without agenda, she said, we invite opportunity for connection.

As she led my mom and me across the threshold of the pasture fence, we all grew a little quieter, as though entering a church. We settled in lawn chairs underneath an oak. Bart the pig appeared—enormous and impossibly round, endlessly munching the acorns scattered around us. Kim had us note our sensory impressions: the thumping of a woodpecker; the green and gold leaves overhead; the cool air on our skin. Across the pasture, the horses seemed to accept our presence—our vulnerable human bodies, new to their world.

"Animals and the rest of the natural world can help us remember—help us reconnect with the wisdom within our own bodies"



When roaming freely, a herd of horses will align their bodies in relation to one another to communicate and create support, Kim explained. After some time inside the pasture, she suggested we gently approach them, then model our own behavior after theirs.

I positioned myself at what felt like a safe distance from Reli, mirroring his body language with my own. Nearby, Kim offered soft-spoken guidance: "Ashleigh, Reli seems okay with you being here. Why don't you move a little closer?"

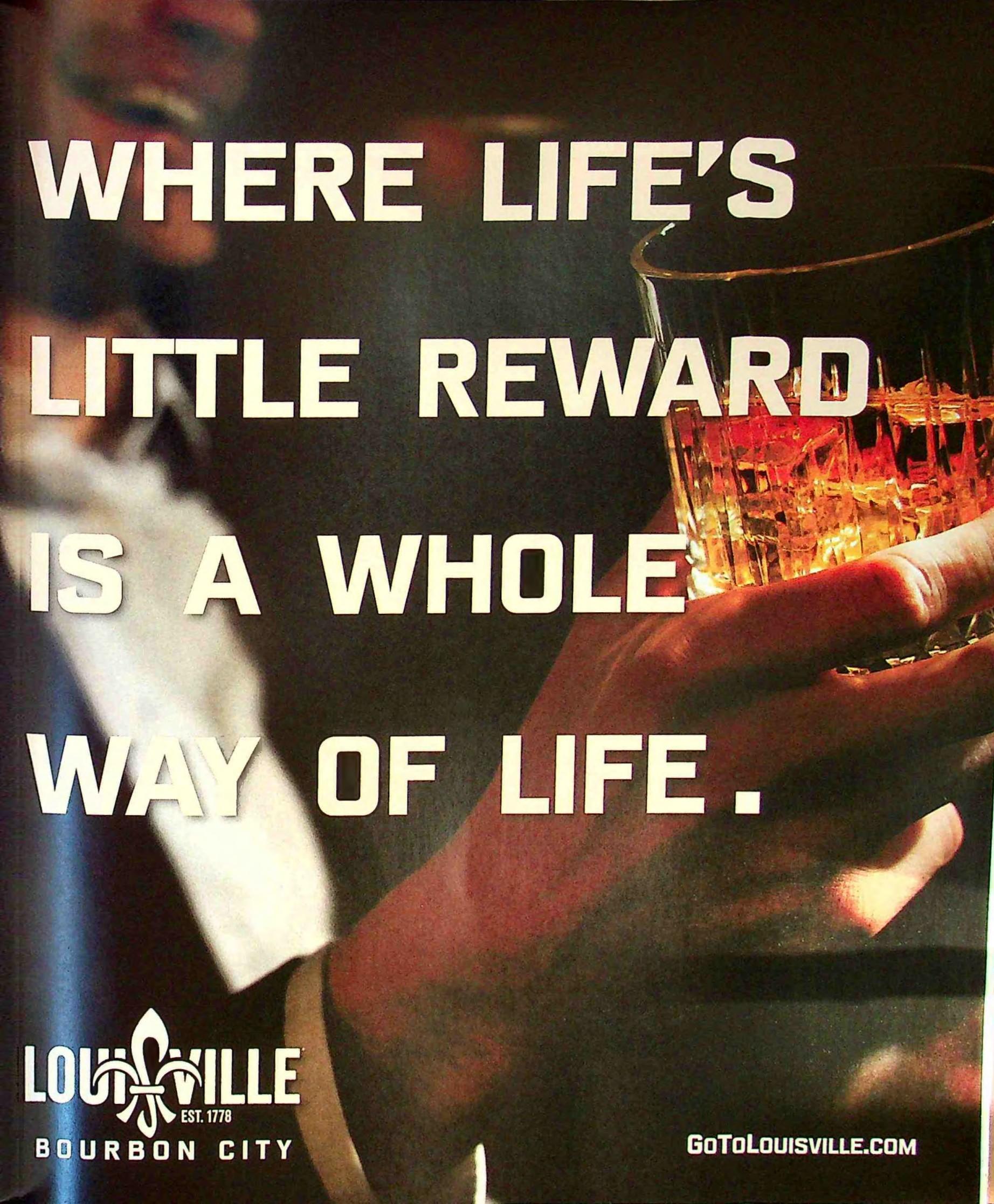
Earlier in the afternoon, Kim had shared that Reli did not always welcome human touch—and she had emphasized the importance of respecting a horse's boundaries. But if I didn't risk closing the gap, Reli and I would remain parallel, without opportunity for more.

I moved step by slow step. Reli seemed relaxed, so I moved nearer still. Then, all at once, he turned and walked steadily toward me. I felt a flash of fear—he was so large.

But our senses ground us within our own animal bodies and tune us into intuition. As Reli passed, I sensed an invitation. Without caution, I pressed one hand against his torso. I took in through my own body the warmth and strength of his. In return, I let him feel my own steady presence.

By the end of my cancer treatment, I'd felt starved for physical touch. At the same time, touch brings us into our bodies, where I still wasn't sure I was safe. Reli, too, has struggled to navigate the comfort of human touch and the trauma it can evoke. In the pasture, after he let me press my hand to him for just a moment, he moved on—but he stayed closer to me as he grazed.

The Spanish word *relicario*, or reliquary in English, means "a shrine for holy relics." Kim's farm invites both horses and humans to lay down their relics. That afternoon, I lay down my need for words and received, in exchange, a gift: my body in constellation with others, moving together in slow and silent orbit. ☐



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The Southern Agenda

GOINGS-ON IN THE SOUTH & BEYOND

MUSIC

She's Got the Rhythm (and the Blues)

CLARKSDALE, MISSISSIPPI

★
Editors'
Choice

In her song "She Shimmy," when Libby Rae Watson, a blues singer and guitarist from Paschal's, belts out, "Hill Country spirits, all in this hall, clock strikes midnight, we'll be having us a ball," she pays homage to the musicians who blazed a path for her. Names like Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf have long been a part of the Mississippi blues collective memory, and now, thanks to music lovers in Clarksdale, the *women* of blues are getting their due, too. "There's a special energy in this hub for the blues, community, and revitalization in downtown Clarksdale," says Colleen Buyers, who with her organization Shared Experiences launched the Women in Blues Festival (May 19–20), now in its second year. Watson will



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SOUTHERN AGENDA

open this year's festival, followed by performances by Edna Nicole Luckett and LaLa Craig. "I was so happy that we blues artists finally have a space just for women," Watson says. "In my fifty years of performing, I have never seen an event like this."

■ womeninblues.org

TRADITIONS

Alabama

COMMON THREADS

Cross, catch, or slip, every stitch tells a story. Natalie Chanin, founder of the sustainable design company Alabama Chanin, created the nonprofit Project Threadways to uncover, preserve, and share them—both stitches and stories. "Textiles are so intertwined with many areas of the South, from the cotton fields to the sock and T-shirt mills now gone," Chanin says. "Our textile stories—rich, complicated, sometimes brutal, sometimes beautiful—are disappearing, too." Project Threadways' 2023 Symposium (April 20–22), in Chanin's home base of Florence, aims to keep those stories humming, with presentations and workshops. In one event, Viola Ratcliffe of Birmingham's nonprofit Bib & Tucker Sew-Op will describe how quilting-centered programs have inspired a new generation. "I hope we motivate people to create their own art," she says. "I hope we also spark a passion to find and support those doing good in this space."

■ projectthreadways.org

OPENING

Arkansas

BACK TO FORM

Technically Little Rock's Museum of Fine Arts was completed when it opened in 1937, but some critics felt otherwise. A series of add-ons followed throughout the decades, lending the Arkansas Arts Center, as it came to be known in 1960, the architectural clarity of a poorly played game of Tetris. When the museum closed for yet more renovations in July 2019, the architects at Studio Gang took a different tack. In the newly rechristened \$142 million Arkansas

Museum of Fine Arts, opening on April 22, a soaring light-filled central atrium links 133,000 square feet of exhibition, performance, and education spaces with eleven acres of land and gardens. Old meets new, inside meets outside. It's only fitting, then, that one of the inaugural exhibitions, *Together*, reflects connections—among people and with the natural world. As curator Catherine Walworth says, those connections aren't just between visitors; they apply to the museum staff as well. "It's almost like an expression of our own longing to be back together with audiences and with art."

■ arkmfa.org

SPORTING

Florida

LINE OF HOPE

When Hurricane Ian roared into Southwest Florida last September, the J. N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge suffered major damage to both buildings and wildlife habitat. Coming back will take years of resilience—like the kind that will be on display May 19 when the "Ding" Darling & Doc Ford's Tarpon Tournament kicks off from the Sanibel Island waterfront. The one-day catch-and-release tournament raised over \$1 million for the refuge in its first ten years. Named for a famed cartoonist and pioneering conservationist, the refuge was the site of the first recorded tarpon caught, in 1885 off Sanibel, by an angler using hook and line. Although the Doc Ford's Sanibel location remains closed, the well-known restaurant vowed to continue the tournament. "That was a real morale boost to this community," says Chelle Koster Walton, who works with the refuge's Wildlife Society. "We need all the support we can muster down here."

■ dingdarlingsociety.org

GOLF

Georgia

IT'S IN THE DRINK

During Masters week at Augusta National (April 6–9), the lucky few with access to the clubhouse will toast the course's famous



flowers with an azalea cocktail—a mix of vodka or gin, lemon, pineapple, and grenadine that serves as the tournament's unofficial drink. Downtown Augusta bars follow suit; Craft & Vine on Broad Street puts on a weeklong celebration and keeps an azalea atop the cocktail list. "During the Masters, Augusta transforms," says Breannah Newton, a director for Craft & Vine's hospitality group. To bring the party home, shake up two parts vodka, one part lemon juice, one part pineapple juice, and enough grenadine to give the drink a pink tinge. Pour it over ice and top with a lemon slice. "It's bright and refreshing and has a balanced sweetness," Newton says. We hear it pairs perfectly with a pimento cheese sandwich.

■ masters.com

■ craftandvine.com

ANNIVERSARY

Kentucky

BORN AND BREAD

The historic Brown Hotel in downtown Louisville celebrates its centennial this year, but you might be more familiar with the spot's namesake sandwich than its stately Georgian Revival exterior, marble floors, and hand-painted plaster ceilings. In 1926, chef Fred Schmidt invented the first version of a Hot Brown sandwich to appease hungry guests, who took advantage of a party band's midnight break to refuel. The sandwich has become a Louisville bucket-list standard, especially around the Derby (May 6). "Two slices of Texas toast, two slices of bacon, seven ounces of hand-carved turkey breast, sliced tomatoes, all topped with Mornay sauce and served bubbly and sizzling in a ceramic skillet," explains Marc Salmon, a director at the hotel who also serves as its unofficial historian. "Nowadays we serve Hot Browns for breakfast, lunch, and dinner."

■ brownhotel.com

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Photo by Ethan Horwitz

Alabamablackbeltadventures.org



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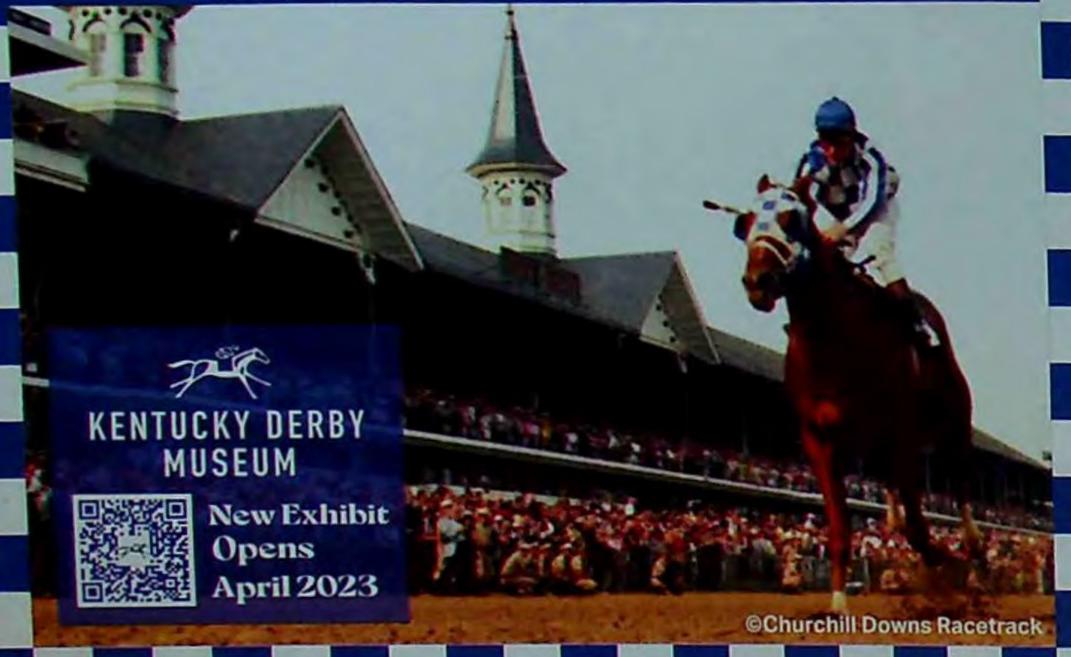
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SOUTHERN AGENDA

GARDENS

Louisiana

CAMELLIA CAPERS

Like memories, plants can be lost to time. "If they're not cared for, they can disappear," says F. Wayne Stromeier, who along with his colleague Trenton L. James wrote the new book *Early Camellias in Louisiana* to document exciting rediscoveries of the South's favorite winter flowers. "Often, no one's keeping up with their names. Some camellias have been sitting here for two centuries, but no one knew what they were." Traveling to historic sites throughout the state and conferring with garden experts, Stromeier and James tracked down such elusive varieties as the bright crimson Chandleri at St. John's Episcopal Church in Laurel Hill and the strikingly rosy Landrethii at the 1790s estate Butler Greenwood outside St. Francisville. "They were going around like detectives looking for flowers and forgotten gardens," says Cybèle Gontar, an art historian who edited and published the book. The last of the season's blooms can be spotted through March, and early spring is also the best time to plant camellias: Louisianans can find Lady Hume's Blush, Professor Charles Sargent, and other old and rare varieties at nurseries such as Larry Bates Nursery in Forest Hill and Mizell's Camellia Hill Nursery in Folsom. "There is a place for historic camellias in any garden," Stromeier says, "for those who are looking."

■ vellichorpress.org

CONSERVATION

Maryland

EGGING THEM ON

Come springtime, Tami Pearl will scour Maryland's Assateague Island National Seashore, looking for piping plover nests. Some twenty breeding pairs of the petite shorebird—listed as threatened since 1986 because of coastal development and sea level rise—use the island year after year, arriving in March from as far south as the Bahamas to breed and lay eggs. When Pearl, a biological science technician who conducts the island's annual avian pop-



ulation surveys, finds a nest, she builds a cage around it that lets in the birds but keeps out larger predators until the chicks emerge in May. "When they hatch, they're like cotton balls on toothpicks," she says. They leave the nest and roam the dunes and beaches with their parents, perfectly camouflaged and ready to deploy their best defense mechanism—standing dead still—if a parent pipes out a warning call. "One time, I saw a chick freeze mid-run, with one foot still in the air," Pearl remembers. "And sometimes they dip down in a hoofprint from one of our horses." To spot a plover on Assateague before they head south, Pearl recommends walking along the water (the interior beach is off-limits during nesting season), binoculars ready, and looking far ahead to see a sand-colored puff speeding off on orange legs.

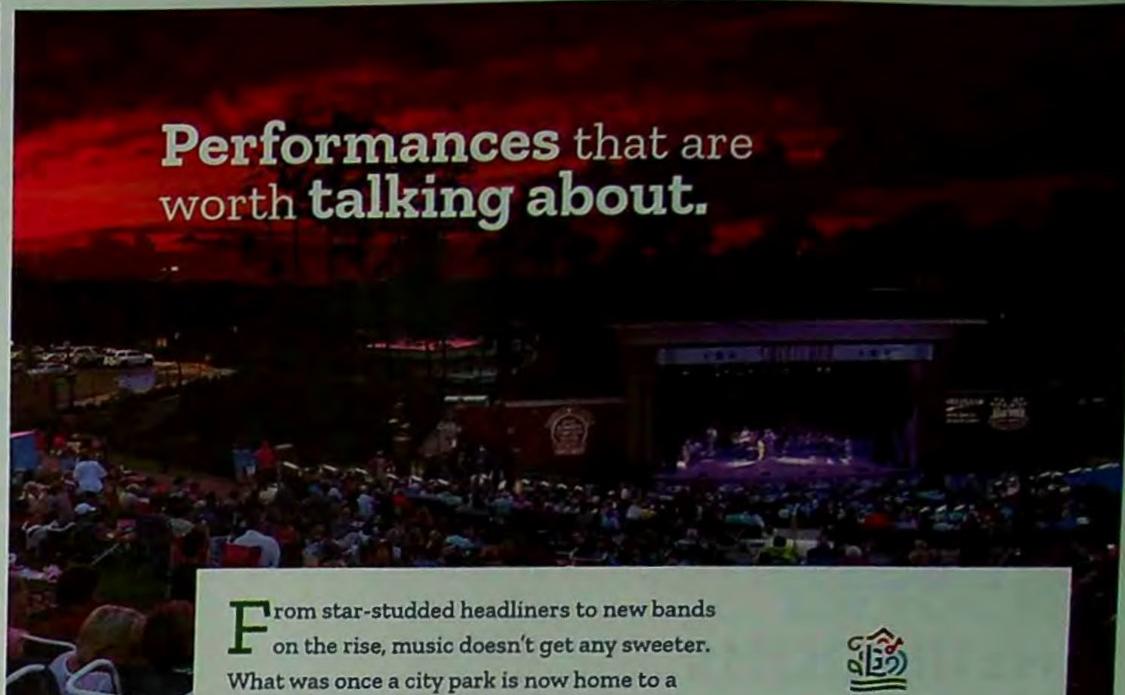
■ nps.gov/asis/index.htm

OPENING
North Carolina

FAMILY-STYLE DINING

Chef Sunny Gerhart has long been experimenting with pasta at his Raleigh restaurant, St. Roch Fine Oysters + Bar, and diners can try his top success stories when he opens Olivero on a cobblestone-lined corner of downtown Wilmington later this spring. His legacy will wind through the handmade pastas and paella inspired by his grandparents' origins, and season the jambalaya influenced by his childhood in the Big Easy. "I'm learning more about Italian and Spanish food and what that means through a New Orleans lens," Gerhart says. "And that just happens to be a part of my family's story." Gerhart dedicated his old-world-style restaurant to his mother and named it after her father, a sailor who immigrated to New Orleans from Seville and married into an Italian family. He'll anoint the centerpiece of Olivero's open kitchen—a wood-burning grill, visible from the

Performances that are worth **talking about.**



From star-studded headliners to new bands on the rise, music doesn't get any sweeter. What was once a city park is now home to a 2,500-seat amphitheater where starry nights and spacious blue skies add to the laidback vibe, and spectacular surroundings are part of every performance. VisitLaGrange.com



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SOUTHERN AGENDA

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■ oliveroil.com

ART

South Carolina

A SILVER (AND INDIGO) LINING

"Art teaches us about cultural contributors," says Caroline Gwinn, executive director of the Aiken Center for the Arts. "Who contributed to South Carolina history and who is contributing now?" In the *Interwoven* exhibition (March 30–May 3), part of that answer lies with Kaminer Haislip, a Charleston silversmith who uses tools and processes that were popular prior to the Industrial Revolution. The work of Madame Magar, a Johns Island textile artist who grows indigo, unlocks even more history. On view together, their works reference early colonial times until the Civil War, when silver and indigo dominated markets. "I'm interested in art and craft that deals with a sense of place and history, but at the same time turns traditions upside down," Magar says. Her palm-sized baskets woven with indigo yarn, and Haislip's shiny coffee pot fitted with a purple heartwood handle, place historic processes firmly in the present. The artists joined forces to create self-portrait silhouettes, dyed on cotton by Magar and framed in delicate hoops forged by Haislip, the two mediums connected in time and, now, space.

■ aikencenterforthearts.org

MUSIC

Tennessee

ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING

We all know the words, but only the brave will belt out the song "I Will Always Love You" anywhere beyond the privacy of their shower or car. Fifty years after Dolly Parton penned the showstopper, it remains one of her biggest hits, gracing the number-one spot when it debuted and again when she rerecorded it in 1982. (Whitney Houston's heartbreaking 1992 rendition is still the best-selling single of all time by a woman.) To mark the song's golden anniversary, the

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Dollywood theme park in Pigeon Forge is kicking off its season with an I Will Always Love You Celebration (through April 8). Once the song anniversary concludes, the park's Flower & Food Festival springs to life (April 21-June 11) with giant topiary-like sculptures dripping with flowers; one portrays Parton's mother, Avie Lee, sewing the inspiration for another Parton classic, "Coat of Many Colors."

■ dollywood.com

HOTELS

Texas

CHARACTER STUDY

In historic Fredericksburg, a cement elephant presides over 242 East Main Street, marking the original home of the White Elephant Saloon, built in 1888. That preserved marker is now just one of the protected treasures at the soon-to-open Albert Hotel. Fittingly named after the architect Albert Keidel, the new hotel pays homage to one of Texas's most important preservation families, making soulful use of historic spaces—the saloon, the Keidel family home (built in 1860), an 1870 home, and the 1906 Keidel Pharmacy—sprawling across a coveted slice of downtown. "The hotel environment is a push-pull of masculine and feminine, historic and new," says director of design Melanie Raines. At the Restaurant at Albert Hotel, one of three new dining options, a proper sit-down dinner might start with executive chef Michael Fojtasek's amuse-bouche of chicken liver mousse on a potato roll, and end with a nightcap in the White Elephant room.

■ alberthotel.com

ANNIVERSARY

Virginia

THEY'VE GOT IT ALL

For two centuries, the Library of Virginia in Richmond has served as the commonwealth's unofficial Department of Hoarding, amassing more than 180 million records and artifacts, from governors' papers to travel brochures to a magic wand. This year, the city-block-sized building

celebrates its bicentennial with *200 Years, 200 Stories*, an exhibition that sorts through the holdings to recognize hundreds of fascinating Virginians. Don't come looking for Washington, Jefferson, and other founding fathers, though. "This is not about the who's who of Virginia," says Gregg Kimball, the library's director of public services and outreach. Instead, the staff highlights notable but often lesser-known citizens such as Ethel Bailey Furman, the state's first Black female architect, who designed about two hundred residences and churches in Central Virginia during the twentieth century. As for the wand, it belonged to Melanie MacQueen, who became a statewide celebrity when, from 1989 to 2013, she starred in Virginia Lottery commercials as a fairy godmother named Lady Luck.

■ lva.virginia.gov/200

TRADITIONS

Washington, D.C.

IT'S A SMALL WORLD

Unless you're a diplomat or leading a trade delegation, it's not easy to snag an invitation to an embassy. "It's considered foreign land," says Victor Shibley, publisher of the *Washington Diplomat*, which covers D.C.'s international community. "You're entering a foreign country, basically." But every May, Washington puts out a rare welcome mat to us commoners during the Around the World Embassy Tour (May 6) and the European Union Open House (May 13). In previous years, Indonesia has brought in food trucks, and Colombia has staged folkloric dance performances in its front yard. Other countries have offered rum, cocktail, and coffee tastings.

■ culturaltourismdc.org

OUTDOORS

West Virginia

GO YOUR OWN WAY

The best route between two points isn't necessarily a straight line. Some Appalachian Trail trekkers take a flip-flop hike, starting their adventure in the middle in Harpers Ferry, and walking 1,200 miles north. Once they summit Mount Katahdin, Maine, the traditional end, they catch a ride back to their West Virginia starting point. Then they hike another thousand miles south to finish where most people start, at Springer Mountain, Georgia. Harpers Ferry and nearby Brunswick, Maryland, celebrate the contrarian route with an annual Flip Flop Kickoff (April 22-23), with hiking-skills workshops and a communal high-carb breakfast to send adventurers on their way. Flip-flopping saves wear and tear on the trail—during March and April, thousands of people may clog the route near the Georgia starting point. Beginning in the middle helps hikers too, says Deb Coleman, a retired lawyer who completed a flip-flop thru-hike in 2017. Time it right, and you can avoid weather extremes, walking north in what can feel like perpetual spring, and heading south in mostly fall weather. "I like a certain amount of solitude on the trail, and that part appealed to me," Coleman says. "I never had snow or freezing temperatures. And I only found a full shelter once, which is unheard-of." The Appalachian Trail Conservancy began promoting the alternate routing in 2015, says Laurie Potteiger, who helped plan the first festival. But year after year, there's still one misconception she must address: No one is advocating a hike in flip-flops. "You wouldn't get more than ten feet."

■ flipflopfestival.org

—Larry Bleiberg, Caroline Sanders Clements, Stacy Conde, Jordan P. Hickey, Chatham Kennedy, Jennifer Kornegay, Lindsey Liles, T. Edward Nickens, Dana Rebmann, and Anne Tate

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West Virginia

GO YOUR OWN WAY

The best route between two points isn't necessarily a straight line. Some Appalachian Trail trekkers take a flip-flop hike, starting their adventure in the middle in Harpers Ferry, and walking 1,200 miles north. Once they summit Mount Katahdin, Maine, the traditional end, they catch a ride back to their West Virginia starting point. Then they hike another thousand miles south to finish where most people start, at Springer Mountain, Georgia. Harpers Ferry and nearby Brunswick, Maryland, celebrate the contrarian route with an annual Flip Flop Kickoff (April 22-23), with hiking-skills workshops and a communal high-carb breakfast to send adventurers on their way. Flip-flopping saves wear and tear on the trail—during March and April, thousands of people may clog the route near the Georgia starting point. Beginning in the middle helps hikers too, says Deb Coleman, a retired lawyer who completed a flip-flop thru-hike in 2017. Time it right, and you can avoid weather extremes, walking north in what can feel like perpetual spring, and heading south in mostly fall weather. "I like a certain amount of solitude on the trail, and that part appealed to me," Coleman says. "I never had snow or freezing temperatures. And I only found a full shelter once, which is unheard-of." The Appalachian Trail Conservancy began promoting the alternate routing in 2015, says Laurie Potteiger, who helped plan the first festival. But year after year, there's still one misconception she must address: No one is advocating a hike in flip-flops. "You wouldn't get more than ten feet."

■ flipflopfestival.org

—Larry Bleiberg, Caroline Sanders Clements, Stacy Conde, Jordan P. Hickey, Chatham Kennedy, Jennifer Kornegay, Lindsey Liles, T. Edward Nickens, Dana Rebmann, and Anne Tate

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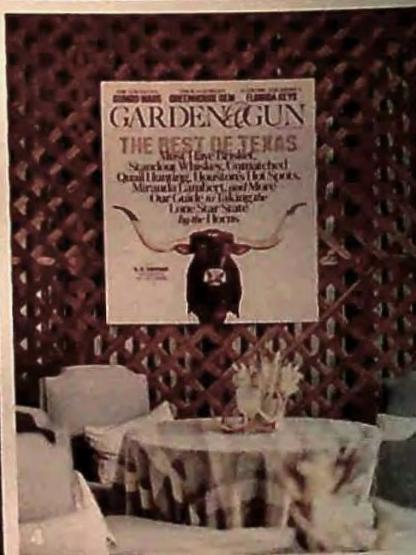
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GARDEN & GUN

Field Report

A RESOURCE FOR THE BEST EVENTS,
EXCURSIONS, AND PROMOTIONS

PEOPLE, PLACES, PARTIES



JANUARY 19-22

G&G at Blue Hills

Round Top, Texas

In partnership with Explore Charleston, G&G invited guests to take a break from shopping in Round Top at the Winter Antiques Show to enjoy cocktails and snacks at the G&G Club Pop-Up—a stylish speakeasy at Blue Hills. On Friday night, designers and friends of G&G celebrated the launch of the Texas issue, with an exclusive and stylish fete, designed by Holloway Events.

1. Guests arrive at the G&G Club Pop-Up. 2. Audis in front of Blue Hills stand ready to provide ride and drive opportunities for guests throughout the show. 3. Hart Hagerty, Charleston native and founder of HART, showcases her custom jewelry. 4. The cover of the Garden & Gun February/March Texas issue, on display at the G&G Club Pop-Up. 5. From left: Christian C. Bryant, vice president and publisher of Garden & Gun, with Catherine Dority, Explore Charleston's director of marketing; Rebecca Wesson Darwin, cofounder and president of Garden & Gun, and Colleen Glenn, associate publisher of marketing of Garden & Gun. 6. The cocktail of the night, the Double Barrel, composed of Blade and Bow Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey, lemon juice, and cinnamon honey syrup. 7. Select Charleston products from Fieldshop by Garden & Gun available for purchase at the event. 8. From left: Amanda Heckert, executive editor of Garden & Gun; Stephanie Disney, show manager of Blue Hills; and Mariana Barran, artist and designer of Hibiscus Linens. 9. The Designer Dinner in the barns of Blue Hills adorned with Bevolo lanterns.

JANUARY 24

Spoletto Dinner and a Show

Dallas, Texas

Garden & Gun and Explore Charleston presented an exclusive dinner and show for Park House Dallas members. The three-course meal, accompanied by bourbon cocktails from Blade and Bow Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey, included a musical performance by pianist Pedja Mužijević, upcoming Spoletto Festival USA headliner.

10. From left: Alicia Gregory, chair of the board of directors at Spoletto Festival USA with pianist Pedja Mužijević; Rebecca Wesson Darwin, cofounder and president of Garden & Gun; and Doug Warner, vice president of media and innovation development at Explore Charleston. 11. Park House Dallas is set to welcome members and VIPs for the dinner and performance. 12. The second-course option of molasses-soy-glazed salmon with carrots, snow peas, toasted sesame, and marble Texan roasted potatoes prepared by the Park House Dallas culinary team. 13. Spoletto Festival USA general director and CEO Mena Mark Hanna speaks about the forthcoming forty-seventh Spoletto Festival USA season before Pedja Mužijević's performance. 14. Pianist Pedja Mužijević performs before dinner.



10



12



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14



15



16



17



18



19

JANUARY 25

Lewis Barbecue Pop-Up

Austin, Texas

Garden & Gun, in partnership with Explore Charleston, welcomed Texas-born, Charleston-based pitmaster John Lewis back home to the Lone Star State for a one-of-a-kind barbecue experience in Austin accompanied by live music and cocktails.

15. Guests are seated for a West Texas grill dinner including prime beef back ribs, Lewis Barbecue Hatch green chile corn pudding, cowboy coleslaw, and boracho pinto beans served family style. 16. John Lewis, pitmaster and owner of Lewis Barbecue and Rancho Lewis, presents the main course of smoked prime beef back ribs. 17. The Texas Sour, served during cocktail hour, composed of Blade and Bow Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey, lemon juice, and spiced wine. 18. The Hillsiders perform. 19. Jason Stover and Layla Price depart a complimentary ride in one of Audi's 2023 luxury vehicles as part of Audi's event concierge service.

JANUARY 28

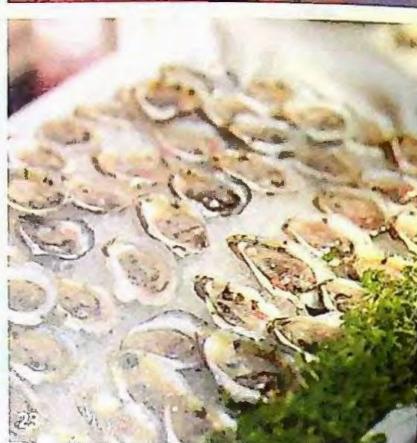
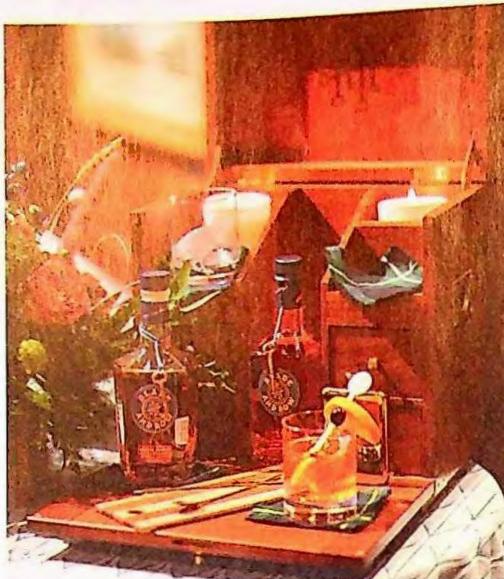
Backyard Bash

Houston, Texas

In partnership with Blade and Bow Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey, G&G toasted the first-ever Texas issue of the magazine with a wild game dinner, live music, and signature bourbon cocktails, hosted at outdoor retailer Gordy & Sons.

20. A Blade and Bow New Fashioned from the field bar. **21.** Guests chat over cocktails at Gordy & Sons. **22.** Chef Danielle Prewett showcases

her supper featuring Broken Arrow Ranch wild hog loin served with Blade and Bow and caramelized onion compound butter, alongside John Salazar and Carl Walker of Brennan's of Houston. **23.** Texas Oyster Ranch Copano Unos.



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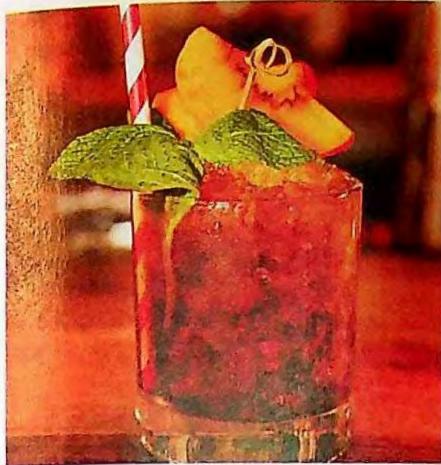
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SIGNATURE EVENTS

Mark your calendar for these upcoming *Garden & Gun* experiences



Mint Julep Month Dinner

April 13

Austin, Texas

Toast Mint Julep Month by joining G&G and Louisville Tourism in the heart of Austin's Music Lane at Hotel Magdalena for a special cocktail hour and dinner. Guests are invited to join us for bourbon cocktails inspired by the classic drink, followed by a three-course menu from one of Louisville's top chefs.

Taste of Tennessee

April 27

Goshen, Kentucky

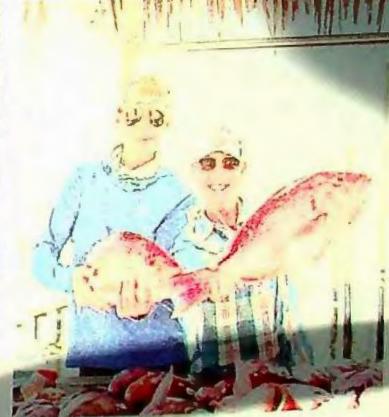
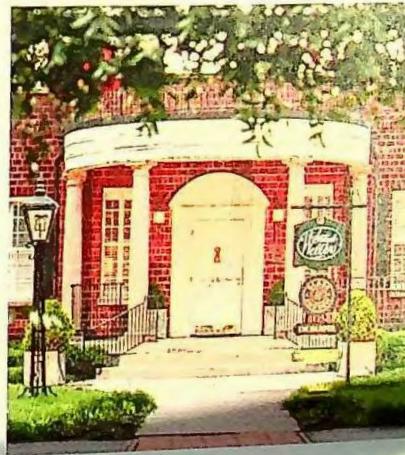
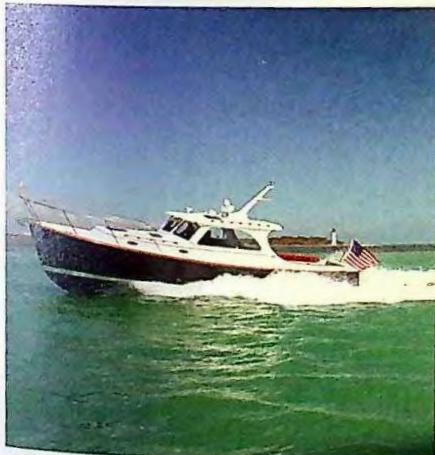
In partnership with Visit Sevierville, G&G brings the flavors of Eastern Tennessee to Kentucky's celebrated Barn8 Restaurant at Hermitage Farm. Hosted by award-winning chef Deron Little of Seasons 101 in Sevierville, the multicourse meal will also feature creative moonshine cocktails by distiller Danielle Parton of Shine Girl.

Sunday Supper

April 30

Atlanta, Georgia

Celebrate the tradition of Sunday suppers with Visit Winston-Salem at the Garden & Gun Club. Join executive chef Sam Davis as he collaborates with two-time James Beard Award Best Chef: Southeast semifinalist Stephanie Tyson and partner Vivian Joiner, owners of Winston-Salem's award-winning Sweet Potatoes (*Well Shut My Mouth!*) restaurant, for a down-home, family-style dinner.



Dockside Dinner Party

May 3

Charleston, South Carolina

Gather aboard a Barton & Gray yacht for a Charleston Harbor cruise, followed by an elegant dinner with G&G and Barton & Gray Mariners Club. Guests will travel to a private home for a seafood meal prepared by James Beard Award-winning author Melissa Martin, chef and owner of New Orleans' Mosquito Supper Club.

A Stitzel-Weller Affair

May 5

Louisville, Kentucky

Join G&G and Stitzel-Weller for the eighth annual Stitzel-Weller Affair. At this cocktail party event, guests will enjoy Southern-inspired fare and live music by Nashville's Bobby Cool, as well as special pours of the limited release Blade and Bow 22-Year-Old Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey.

Seafood Rodeo

June 10

Pensacola, Florida

G&G and Visit Pensacola present a half day of offshore fishing, creative Florida cocktails, and a Gulf-to-table dinner at Pensacola's newest lodging house, Lily Hall. Guests will indulge in a multicourse meal featuring the catch of the day prepared by three outstanding chefs.



BY ROY BLOUNT JR.

Hold Everything

A PASSIONATE PLEA FOR A SIMPLER PLATE OF FOOD

Reading about contemporary food lately, I keep running into something called Banana Everything Cookie. Why *banana* everything? That's like calling the earth Banana Everything Planet. If these cookies have *everything*, why not call them The Cookies?

Too many elements. It's a trend. Did you know that Krystal recently offered a burger embellished with "BBQ bacon cheese" (whatever that is) or pimento cheese? So there is such a thing now as a classic slider. Elegant, exemplary, timeless. But that's just one category.

I appreciate a basic Krystal, or six. Say you've had a little too much to drink. Or more than a little and spilled some of it. In either case, a traditional Krystal will absorb some of that. If it's got "BBQ bacon cheese" on it, though...

Too many elements can throw anything off. A musician's sound in New Orleans is described as "hillbilly-post-punk-goth-rock," and "Hank Williams meets the Smiths meets Siouxsie and the Banshees." I have tried to eat burgers like that lately. Ostrich meat gamely fighting its way out of a pretzel-dough bun roughly enfolding chili and fries (slopping around *inside* the bun, do I make myself clear?) and onions

and bell peppers and so many other layers, there's no way you can pick it up by hand or get a comprehensive cross-section bite of it with any imaginable combination of utensils.

I'm not calling for throwback austerity, like Michael Pollan when he says, "Don't eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food." In my case, that would exclude yogurt, garlic, and boudin, not to mention sushi.

You didn't think I was recommending a *combination*...? Good.

In *Esquire* I read of an eatery called Nudibranch, which provides "a mash-up of occasionally Korean foundations with everything from bottarga to aji panca peppers to Shaoxing wine to huitlacoche [what, no raw goat meat?],...and alpaca tartare [ah, there it is!]...[the food] made me laugh along with the sheer chutzpah of it all." Turns out a nudibranch is a kind of sea slug. And huitlacoche is corn smut. As my great-grandmother might say, like Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind*, "Hm!"

But Nudibranch is in New York City, the East Village. The Bob Evans "farmhouse kitchen" chain is a Middle America concept. So why does Bob serve not only "Cinnabiscuits" (with warm cream-cheese icing) but also, to quote the menu fully, "CHICKEN-N-NOODLES DEEP-DISH: Signature house-

made Deep-Dish Chicken-N-Noodles and our famous mashed potatoes atop a freshly-baked buttermilk biscuit." That biscuit is buried under eight hyphens, a stack of two other starches (one of them famous: "Hey, aren't you a celebrity? You resemble somebody's famous mashed potatoes!"), and some chicken.

A reaction is bound to come. Simplify, simplify. But we have been conditioned to expect multifarious bites.

In a supermarket the other day, I encountered a whole separate display for these:

"Muddy Bites, the best part of a sundae cone." The pointed tip of like a Nutty Buddy or a Drumstick, with all the layers. "Now available as a bite-sized snack. The best bite, over and over again. It's...Happiness Multiplied!" I don't know how they could get a drop of melted ice cream in each one, though.

Here's what you can get at one pizza chain:

Papa Johns Papa Bowls. No crust, just myriad toppings, together in a bowl. Eat it with a spoon? I guess—not, surely, with your hands. What this does is, it eliminates the *original foundation* of pizza. The foundation has been overtopped. I would miss the crust. Emotionally.

What's next? Iterations of that perfect forkful of casserole you dropped on the floor? Full cups of the next-to-last milkshake slurry?

Much, no doubt, will depend on marketing. I would never have considered eating scraps of whale meat fried by the sun, until I read Melville's description in *Moby-Dick*. Whale fritters smell like "old Amsterdam housewives' dough-nuts," he writes, and "they have such an eatable look that the most self-denying stranger can hardly keep his hands off."

"My partner and I," says Ishmael,
"Don't need a several-dish meal."

Since it's just Queek and me
(When he's not at sea),
We're fine with a blubber-and-fish
meal." ☐

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